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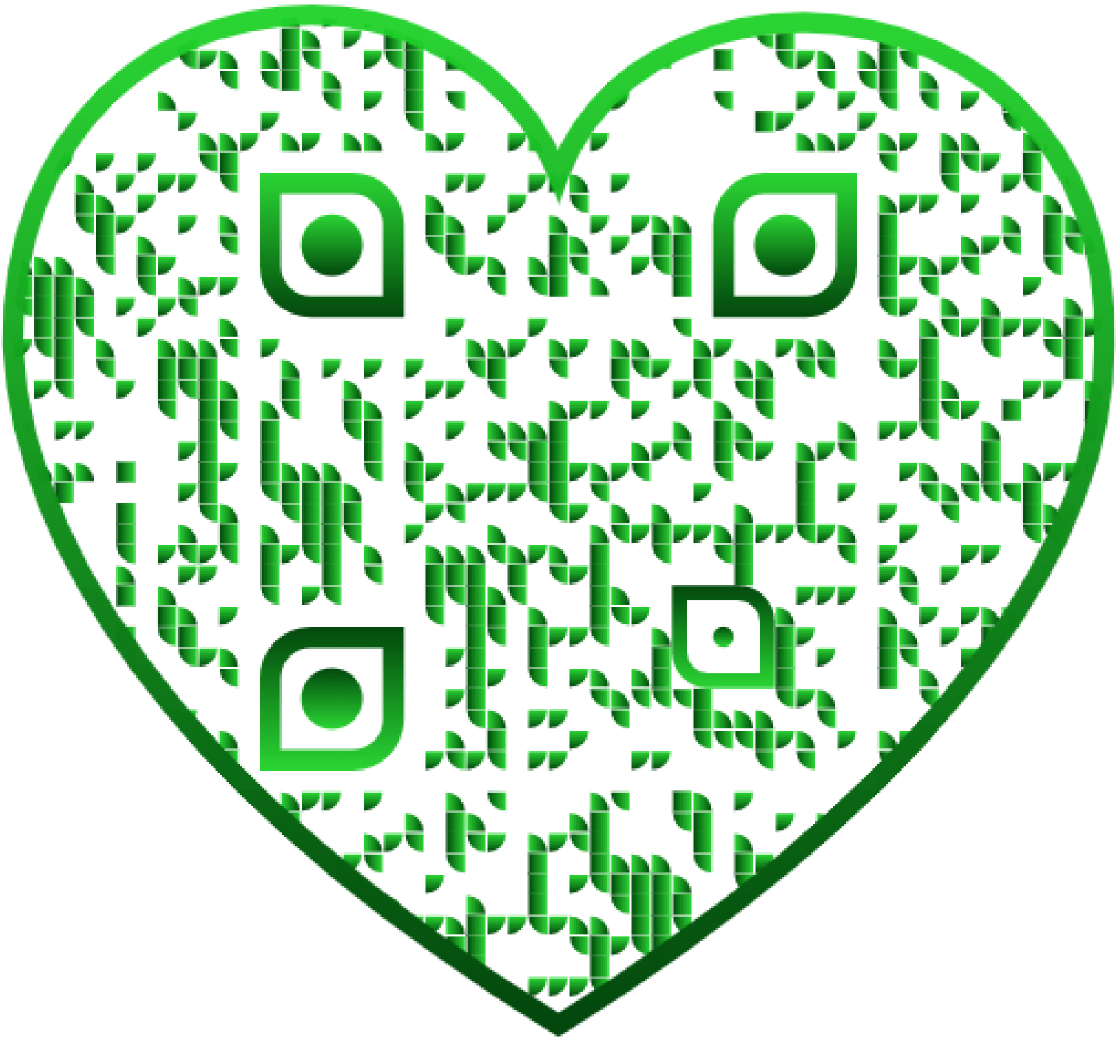

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A warm welcome

Power to the people

This is a good time of year for reflecting, thinking and trying to make sense of the world, with or without a glass (or mug) of something lovely and warming. After a serious battering from Storm Darragh in early December at my home in west Wales (and a power cut of four-plus days), my brain has been working a little overtime. Aside from pondering why such powerful and (sometimes) damaging storms have gentle, sweet-sounding names, I've been thinking about what I need should another power cut occur.

This one caught me totally unawares you see. Well, the red weather warning and mobile alert was a good indicator of strong winds, so the garden and polytunnels were properly prepared the day before. No, what I mean is the length of the power cut was extremely tricky to deal with, and especially so at this time of year. The first day was fine, a bit of a novelty, almost cooking off a stove, but the sheer darkness closing in from 3.30pm onwards and the cold that crept slowly but surely into your bones really got to us come day three. As I munched on Christmas cake and drank cup of tea after tea to keep warm, it made me worry about those much more vulnerable than myself, without food and shelter, and how they were coping.

It was really interesting to see how such a disaster brought people together in the majority of cases. The neighbours that rallied around to help remove fallen trees from roads (most of them were affected), that checked on vulnerable neighbours, and strangers who just chatted randomly and shared stories of woe. I found I was frustratingly ill-prepared for such a prolonged power cut and rallied around to improvise with charging devices from the car, battery-powered lights, Christmas candles and such-like to try and weather the storm.

So, in this issue I'm delighted to offer so many articles offering resilient ideas for making, mending and doing, which we hope can help with the so-called January blues. From healthy drinks and plants to ideas for saving money and inspiration to hopefully help you all feel a little warmer inside over the fortnight ahead.

This issue our merry band of brilliant expert *AG* contributors include Ruth Hayes, Bob Flowerdew, Graham Clarke, Anne Swithinbank, Lucy Chamberlain, Michael Perry, Beth Chatto Gardens, Barbara Segall, John Negus, Mike Palmer, Andrew Oldham, Adam Kirtland, Liz Zorab, Chris Collins, Ellen Mary, Rosie Irving and Toby Buckland.

We hope you enjoy this issue.

Please keep writing in. I love receiving your ideas, letters, questions, musings and poems. The spirit of *AG* continues rejuvenated, working towards a brighter green future for us all, together.

Kim x

Kim Stoddart *AG*'s editor-in-chief

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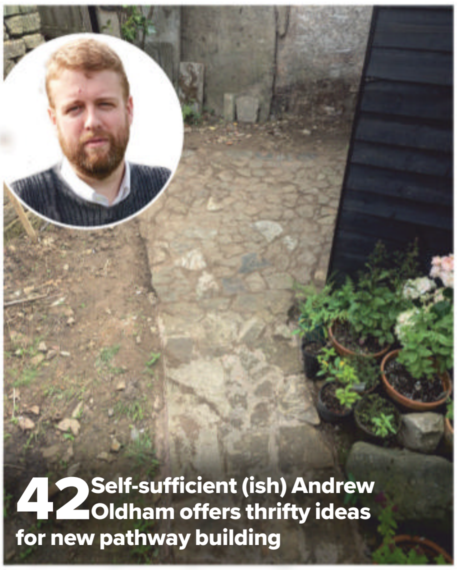
8 Ruth dusts off the January gloom and looks ahead to an exciting year in the garden

62 Toby explains how to give trees the best possible start

26 Foraging fantastic fun with expert and longstanding *AG* columnist Anne Swithinbank



42 Self-sufficient (ish) Andrew Oldham offers thrifty ideas for new pathway building

Your gardening fortnight

6 Your news fortnight
8 Ruth Hayes - jobs and ideas
12 Lucy Chamberlain - fruit and veg
15 Chris Collins - Small space | Big ideas

Great garden ideas

16 Five easy resilient wins for 2025 - Kim Stoddart
18 Home-grown sugar alternatives - Barbara Segall
23 Be merry with mocktails - Ellen Mary
26 The natural forager's garden - Anne Swithinbank
32 Sowing the seeds of love - Mike Palmer
36 Money-saving pallet projects - Rosie Irving
41 Masterclass - Beth Chatto Gardens
42 How to make your own thrifty pathway - Andrew Oldham
48 Beat the blues - Liz Zorab

Gardening wisdom

44 Gardening tea break
46 How to use coffee grounds - Adam Kirtland
52 Seed sowing advice and events
55 Ask John Negus - your questions
58 Letters to the editor
62 New year, new yew - Toby Buckland
65 Plant watch with Michael Perry
66 Bob Flowerdew - Healthy seedlings in winter

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NEXT ISSUE OUT
25 January 2025

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Your NEWS FORTNIGHT

Bringing you some of the gardening news highlights

Peat-free composts outperform their peat rivals

RHS trials show that new blends are as effective as growing media containing peat

The latest peat-free compost trials held by the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) show that growing media made without using peat can perform just as well, or even better, than peat-based products.

The findings were revealed at the gardening charity's annual peat-free conference held in conjunction with four leading UK plant growers and six major growing media manufacturers.

The plants used in the trials were alpines, ericaceous plants, shrubs and herbaceous perennials and the growing factors tested included irrigation, plant nutrition and the saleability of plants at the end of the tests. The participating growers each tested up to six peat-free mixes against a nursery peat-added control.

Dr Alistair Griffiths, RHS Director of Science, said: "These trials provide robust evidence that peat-free growing media are as water efficient as peat-based in spite of the preconceptions. This is an exciting development for the environmental horticulture industry, as it highlights progression towards accelerating the transition to peat-free and improving water and nutrient management.

"These findings mark an important step towards more sustainable, peat-free practices across the sector."

The quality of peat-free compost is improving all the time helping to protect peat bogs

According to an RHS survey of more than 400 growers in 2023, irrigation management was a main concern for transitioning away from peat, and became a key focus for RHS research with growers and growing media manufacturers to assist in developing new growing media technologies that avoid the need for extra irrigation.

Peat-free media's 'dry on top' appearance can sometimes mislead growers into overwatering, but these new findings provide an opportunity for growers to review and optimise water use.

Improved water management also offers added benefits for nutrient retention.

For more information on the RHS Transition to Peat-Free Fellowship visit:

www.rhs.org.uk/science/transition-to-peat-free

For more information on how to transition to peat-free visit: www.rhs.org.uk/advice/peat

The new Palm House is part of the garden's renovation

New plant houses for Kew

Two cutting-edge glasshouses, one permanent and one temporary, have been built as part of Kew's ambitious project to renovate the Royal Botanic Gardens' iconic Palm House and Waterlily House.

The massive Propagation and Decant Glasshouses have been designed for the cultivation of tropical plants during the upcoming renovation of the Palm House and Waterlily House.

Each uses advanced systems to control the temperature, humidity and light management in a more sustainable way.

Preparations for the movement of plants from the Palm House have been in progress for some time, with most of the relocations scheduled from spring 2025.

Concern over grey squirrel numbers

The increase in grey squirrel numbers in areas of the UK where the rarer red squirrels have their strongholds is concerning conservationists.

The Red Squirrels Northern England (RSNE) group said that while numbers of reds are on the rise, populations of grey squirrels in the same areas are rising more steeply.

Abbie McQueen, RSNE's project officer, said: "The substantial increase in grey squirrel presence once again this year is concerning, however we are not disheartened and hope it can help build a case for further funding and support for red squirrels in areas that need it.

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Garden expenditure is set to increase in 2025

A gardening survey carried out by a leading UK horticultural brand has revealed that consumer spending on gardening is set to rise in 2025, reflecting a continued interest in gardening and outdoor spaces.

The survey conducted by Thompson & Morgan found that 87% of 1,196 participants plan to spend the same or more on their gardens in 2025 compared with 2024.

Statistics show that 70% of people are not cutting back in this essential area despite the cost of living crisis, with 18% saying they are going to spend even more. This is great news for the UK's garden retailers as the poor weather in 2024 made it a challenging year, with several companies struggling and even closing some outlets.

Above: Garden centres are set to boom in 2025

David Phillips, T&M's Sales Director, said: 'It's clear from the results of our survey that customers see spending on their garden spaces as not only great value for money, but something worth investing more time, money and effort into.

"We know how much joy a garden can bring and its effects on mental health and well-being. While the cost-of-living crisis refuses to go away, customers see real value in this as a household expense."

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Busy little blue tits took second spot in last year's survey

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Watch the birdie and count their numbers

The UK's largest citizen science wildlife survey returns later this month.

The RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch is back on the weekend of January 24-26 and everyone is invited to sign up and take part.

Across the UK, more than 600,000 people took part in Big Garden Birdwatch 2024, counting a whopping 9.7 million birds.

House sparrows took the top spot, with over 1,440,000 birds seen, but counts of these chirpy birds are down by 60% compared with the first Birdwatch in 1979.

Cheeky little blue tits bagged the second spot with over a million sightings, and starlings came in third place with 879,000 seen.

Wood pigeons and blackbirds took the fourth and fifth spots.

A spokesman for the RSPB said: "We've lost 38 million birds from UK skies in the past 60 years.

"With birds facing so many challenges, it's more important than ever to get involved in the Birdwatch. Every bird you do – or don't – count will give us a valuable insight into how garden birds are faring."

It's easy to take part - log your participation on the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch website and spend just an hour that weekend noting down the birds that land in your garden, local park or wherever you decide to take part.

For full details and to join in, visit www.rspb.org.uk/whats-happening/big-garden-birdwatch/

Woodland Trust celebrates 15 years of school work!

The Woodland's Trust's free and innovative environmental scheme for schools has inspired hundreds of thousands of children across the UK to become interested in nature and conservation.

The Green Tree Schools Award has celebrated its 15-year anniversary and more than a third of all UK schools have joined to learn about woods, wildlife, nature and the environment in a fun and practical way.

Market Harborough C of E Academy in Leicestershire signed up to the UK's largest conservation charity's inspirational scheme in 2008 and started completing simple green activities, such as nature walks, tree-planting or recycling, to gain points and earn bronze, silver and gold awards.

Teacher Nick Bradley said the Woodland Trust's Green Tree School Award has been "fantastic" on so many levels, including getting children involved in nature and doing wonders for their mental health.

"The benefits for the children are never ending," he added. "They learn leaderships skills, gain confidence, find freedom and fun in nature, and find bugs!

"It gets them out of the classroom and interested in the environment and the world around them."

To find out more and sign up, visit www.woodlandtrust.org.uk and search for 'green tree schools award'.

Above: Students at Market Harborough C of E Academy learn about woodland conservation

Standing plants on damp gravel can help them survive winter

RHS advice for keeping houseplants healthy in winter

It is a critical time of year for houseplants and the RHS is advising growers to take steps to save any that are poorly.

Warning signs include yellowing leaves, which could mean the plant needs water and more light, bud or leaf drop caused by a dry atmosphere, and wilting or mould as a result of overwatering.

The RHS will be celebrating houseplants in January at RHS Garden Rosemoor in Devon (January 25-26) and RHS Garden Bridgewater in Salford (31 Jan-2 Feb) with weekend events offering advice, workshops, demonstrations and rare and popular varieties to take home.

You can also visit www.rhs.org.uk/plants/types/houseplants/how-to-help-a-poorly-houseplant for troubleshooting advice.

Funds books for hospice garden charity

A charity dedicated to creating bespoke gardens in children's hospices for patients and their families has received a financial boost from the Horticultural Trades Association (HTA).

The gardening organisation presented the Greenfingers charity with a cheque for £14,537.79 raised through the National Garden Gift Card scheme and supplemented by fundraising efforts from the HTA team.

Greenfingers creates bespoke gardens in children's hospices, offering life-limited children and their families and carers a source of solace, inspiration, and connection through nature.

For more information about Greenfingers Charity visit www.greenfingerscharity.org.uk.

Right: Linda Petrons receives the HTA cheque for Greenfingers

Are you involved in community growing projects where you live? Send in your news by emailing **editor@amateurgardening.com**

Your GARDENING FORTNIGHT

with AG's gardening expert **Ruth Hayes**

When I'm cleaning windows - to let maximum light in to seedlings and cuttings
Inset: **Simple but satisfying - tidy shed shelves**

A gentle welcome to the new year

There's work to do, but take it easy to start with

I always think of the first couple of weeks of January as the 'Dead Zone', when we emerge blinking and slightly dazed back into the real world.

For many, and I include myself in their number, the social expectations of the festive season can be quite draining, so come the new year I like to escape back into the garden and plan for the months ahead.

The winter garden is a special place, sleepy and skeletal, its bare, largely leafless bones letting us see its rudimentary workings and assess what needs doing.

Of course, with the light levels still too meagre for much successful seed sowing and the soil usually frozen or sodden and therefore unworkable, you may think there's not a great deal we can get stuck in to, but this isn't a time for idleness.

Above: **Sharpen and oil secateurs to keep rust at bay**

Over the next couple of weeks I'll be snapping on my rubber gloves and washing down the greenhouse, inside and out, to get it ready for seeds, seedlings and the new year's first cuttings.

We never use fumigators or chemicals to get rid of pests as we don't want to harm other creatures, so an important job will be minutely inspecting the framework and using a plant label to winkle out every little snail hiding in it.

I also need to re-pebble its floor and lay a pathway of paving slabs along the middle to try and prevent 'gravel creep'.

The shed and its contents will be my next objective, sifting through plastic pots to recycle broken ones and washing those that still have life left in them.

There are tools to clean and sharpen, plant labels to wipe clean, seed packets to sort through and lists to write. Not terribly exciting, but when wrapped up warm, with a hot cuppa, the rain drumming on the roof and BBC Radio 6 Music warbling in the background, it's a very soothing way to spend a couple of hours.

Of course we may be lucky and have a break in the weather where the garden starts to dry out and warm up a little, in which case I'll be found carefully edging the borders back into shape.

Instead of using a half-moon tool, I like to dig a moat around the edge of each bed, between the soil and the lawn, and pile the removed earth back onto the border.

It's a technique I first noticed in the gardens of Max Gate, the beautiful home of Dorset author Thomas Hardy just down the road from us, and the result gives a longer-lasting, more clearly defined garden that's all ready for the year ahead.

Four tasks to get you ready for the year

1 Sharpen tools, including your hoe and spade blades, to make it easier to slice through weeds and soil.

2 Clean gardening gloves that can be washed. It keeps them supple and extends their life.

3 Well-defined border edges instantly make the garden look sharper and neater.

Artists
White Spirit

4 There's no need to buy new labels when a wipe with white spirit gets them clean - I wash them afterwards too.

I use cardboard as a soil warmer and weed blocker Inset: **Bubblewrap is excellent insulation for containers**

Reuse and recycle seasonal waste

We can find a second use for almost everything

No matter how hard we try to be paperless and packaging-free and live a life without excessive amounts of plastic, it all seems to come undone at Christmas when the cardboard packaging and protective wrappings start to build up.

Luckily, a lot of Christmas packaging and paraphernalia can be used around the home and garden to save it from the recycling centre or landfill.

Along one wall of our garage (which is so full of 'stuff' we can't actually fit a car inside it) stand five Christmas tree trunks, seasoning nicely and ready to be chopped up for firewood and kindling.

Their needles are long gone, used as mulch for potted ericaceous plants.

In a few weeks' time I'll smear the mistletoe from our festive decorations onto our apple trees, as I do each year, in the hope of some of them taking and slowly growing.

The substance we have most of, of course, is cardboard and this can be recycled as an essential garden tool.

I use it as an early soil warmer and weed blocker on our raised beds, and have also buried it under a dense layer of compost when creating a no-dig border.

Don't forget it can also be cut up and used as one of the important brown elements in your compost bin, creating a perfect balance with green clippings and kitchen waste, or laid on top to keep in the warmth.

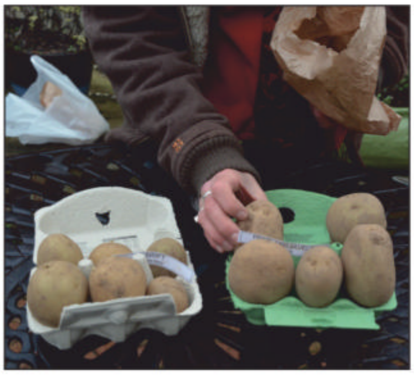
Polystyrene chunks can be broken up and used as lightweight crocks at the bottom of containers, while large polystyrene boxes can double as seed-sowing trays.

It can even be crumbled up and used as an alternative to perlite, though make sure you sieve it out of the compost and dispose of it responsibly afterwards.

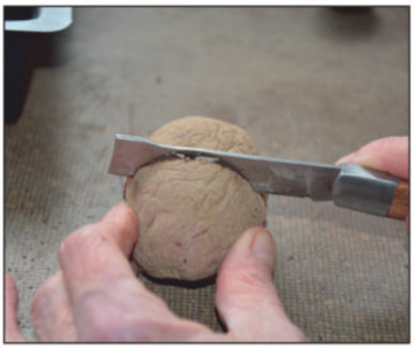
And those ancient Christmas CDs that were 'accidentally' scratched? Hang them up as bird scarers when you get sowing and planting this spring.

Chitting potatoes

Start planning your early tubers



1 It will soon be time to buy 'first early' seed potatoes for this year's crop, so keep a stack of egg boxes or small modules handy for when you come to chit them on a cool light windowsill with their new shoots pointing upwards.



2 Always use seed potatoes because they will be free from potential diseases and other problems. If your potatoes have more than one sprouting 'eye', you can cut them into pieces, each with an eye, to make more potatoes for free!

Using leftovers to give birds a treat

Talking of Christmas leftovers, or 'cold remains' to give them their rather macabre name in our household, instead of chucking them in the food recycling bucket, consider what could be given to the birds.

Cold mashed and roast potatoes, roast parsnips and stale grated cheese are packed with good things that birds will devour to get themselves through the coldest winter days.

The same applies to stale fruit cake, mince pies and stollen - the dried fruit is packed with power for our little feathered friends.

Avoid anything too greasy though, and never use the fat the turkey has been cooked in as it gets smeared on their feathers and breaks down the waterproofing.

Above: **Make sure bird feeders are regularly cleaned and constantly filled** Inset: **Birds love old cheese**

Feeding the garden birds is one of my morning rituals, and the crow family living in the pine trees behind our house now fly down to grab their loot almost before my back is turned. The male (I assume) always gives two 'caws' as he sees me approaching with the food and three as he swoops down with his family.

As well as food, it's important to give birds fresh water for bathing and drinking. If necessary, I melt the ice in the bird bath with some warm water.

Contrary to popular belief, hedgehogs rarely hibernate all winter and often emerge on warmer days to change their bed-place and forage for snacks and water. Make sure you leave food out for them too, but if you see one during daylight hours always contact a local vet or wildlife sanctuary.

You can sow sweet peas now, as I'm doing, or in the autumn

Let's get sowing some sweet peas

These hardy favourites can be started now, says Ruth

One of my New Year's resolutions for 2025 is to be more tidy and ordered and I've started as I mean to go on by finally making use of the collection of loo roll and kitchen paper cardboard inserts that has been building up on a convenient dresser for the past few months.

I've been collecting them (and asking family members to do so too) for sowing this year's sweet peas and beans and now that January has arrived, I've started on the sweet peas.

Like all members of the legume (pea and bean) family, sweet peas produce long roots, which is why they are best sown in deep pots of root trainers that hinge open, allowing the root ball to be planted without much disturbance.

The great thing about using cardboard tubes (apart from reducing the contents of your recycling bin) is that they can go straight into the soil to degrade naturally.

Because I'm somewhat cack-handed and likely to spill compost everywhere, I find the most efficient tools for filling tubes or root trainers are an old spoon or a slender bulb planting trowel.

Use peat-free multipurpose, and there is no need to soak or file seeds to aid germination as modern varieties should germinate without extra help.

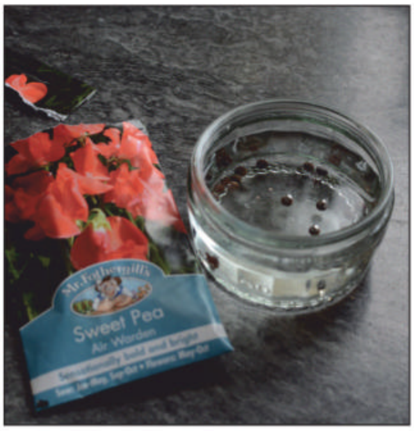
Water your seeds after planting and then don't water again until you see signs of germination, as damp conditions can encourage rotting and fungal diseases.

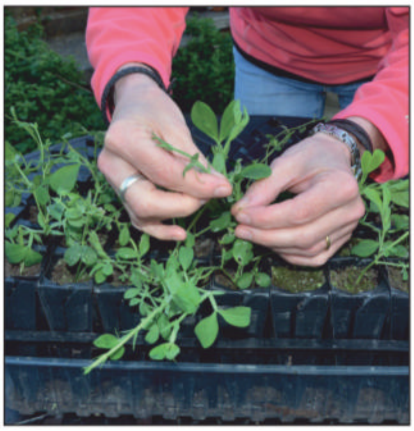
Place your sown seeds somewhere light and frost-free, and if very cold temperatures are forecast, either wrap them in fleece or move them temporarily into a cool porch or unheated spare room.

After germination, pinch out the growing tips when the seedlings are around 10cm (4in) tall. This will encourage side shoots which will give you more flowers.

Above: There is no need to file seeds before planting

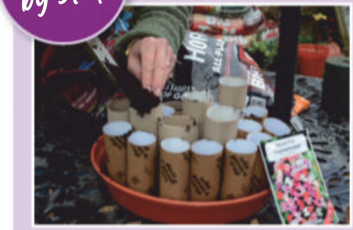
Getting the best from sweet peas

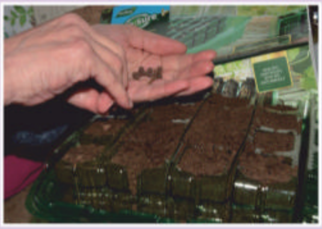

1 If you are thinking of sowing old seeds, test their viability first by dropping them into water. If they sink they are sound and should germinate, if they float they're no good.

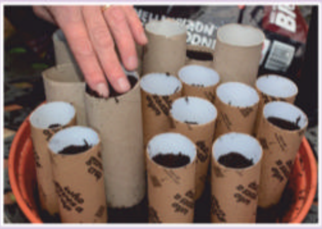

2 Pinching out your sweet pea seedlings encourages robust, bushy growth and lots of flowers. It also stops them getting long and leggy.

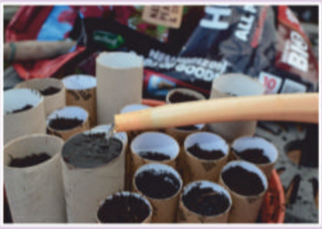
Step by step

Sowing sweet peas


1 Fill your cardboard tube or root trainer with good quality seed compost.


2 Place a seed in the centre of each module or cardboard tube.


3 Cover with around 1cm (1/2in) of compost and gently firm it down.


4 Water gently and place them somewhere light and frost-free.

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Your GARDENING FORTNIGHT

with **Lucy Chamberlain**, AG's fruit and veg expert

Sowing onions from seed, earlier strawberries and magic microgreens

Lucy explains how to make the most of the next three midwinter weeks

Have you already planted some onion sets in autumn, or did yours all bolt last year? Perhaps you're not sure what a set is, or bolting. If so, let me help!

Onion growing can be really simple: buy some onion 'sets' from the garden centre in autumn or spring, plant them, and then lift the resulting bulbs come autumn. And if that appeals to you, please, just keep doing that ('sets' are little tiny bulbs that save you having to sow any seeds).

Many of us are now re-discovering onion seed sowing, though – after all, one packet of 200 onion seeds is far cheaper than 200 sets, and many interesting varieties are available as seeds, but not sets. If you'd like to sow seeds, now is a great time to order them for sowing in March, but you can also sow them now. Sowing now can give you an early harvest of 'normal-sized' bulbs. Because of the consequent long growing season, you could also gain huge, showbench-style bulbs (choose a giant variety like 'Mammoth Improved', for this). Sow into modules, placing one seed per cell if you'd like a larger bulb, or two to four per cell if you'd like lots of smaller ones. Germinate under cover at 10-16°C but don't sow outside now, as it encourages 'bolting'. So, what is that?

Franchi
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TROPEA TONDA ROSSA

Lucy explains how to save money and boost results by sowing onion from seed

Bolting is when your onion prematurely produces a flower spike, rather than swelling up to give a lovely plump bulb. Sets are more likely to bolt than seed-raised crops (you can buy more expensive 'heat-treated' sets that are less likely to bolt), but seedlings can also bolt if they're exposed to a chill, growth check or drought stress. Essentially, keep your seedlings' spring growing conditions warm and moist to discourage bolting (hence why I recommend sowing under cover if starting them off now) and choose varieties that claim to be slow to bolt (e.g. 'Santero', which also handily has downy mildew resistance). So, I'll leave it to you to decide, seeds or sets, but whichever you choose, have a great growing season!

Get extra-early strawberries

✿ Does the thought of picking home-grown strawberries in early May excite you, instead of having to wait until June? Then hold that thought and stride out into your winter plot, to set these tantalising wheels in motion. Strawberries can be forced into early growth if you move them into warmth, now. By choosing varieties that naturally mature early, like 'Vibrant' or 'Honeoye', plant genetics will be on your side, but any variety can be encouraged into growth. By now, your strawberry plants will have experienced a good winter chill – this exposure synchronises the flowers to bloom in an almighty flush, and allows growth to be kick-started. So, do just that by cleaning their containers up, removing old leaves, and moving the plants into gentle warmth (a greenhouse is ideal). If heated, they'll crop a full six weeks earlier than if left outside. So, hold that thought and get your boots on.

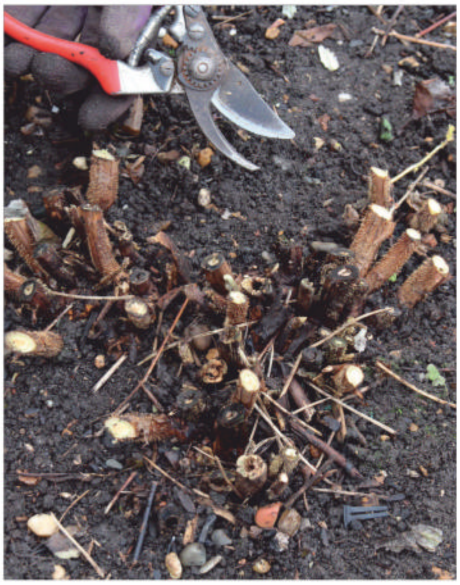
Lucy reveals how to secure super early strawberries

All images unless otherwise credited © Lucy Chamberlain

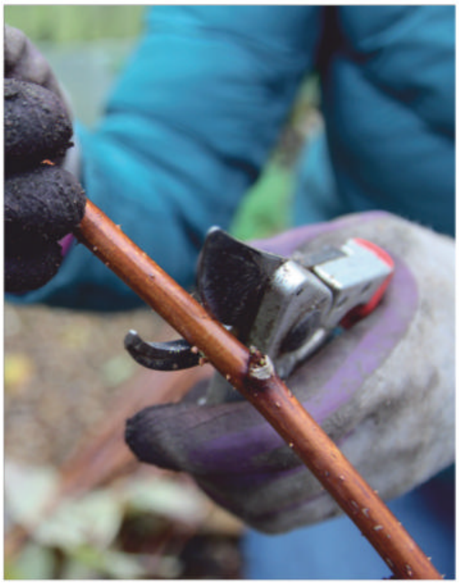
Step by step Prune autumn raspberries:

Late-season canes such as 'Autumn Bliss' and 'Polka' bear fruits from late July right through until the first frosts, so now that plants are dormant, step in to prune rows into shape. The task is incredibly easy, plus it requires a bit of energy so it helps to keep gardeners warm on winter days. Here's what to do:

1 First, let me give you the simplest way to prune autumn raspberries: grab yourself a kneeler, some eye protection and stout gloves (the canes are really bristly) then, choosing some long-handled loppers or sharp secateurs, start chopping the canes of your autumn raspberries down to ground level.



2 Keep on cutting until all the canes are in-check, then tidy any weeds, old leaves and other debris away. By the time you've finished you're left with a very tidy row of cane stumps (please don't treat summer raspberries this way as such hard pruning will cut off all the potential fruits for 2025).



3 If you're feeling confident with your canes, you can cut them down by half (instead of to soil level), just above a plump dormant bud. This lower half of the autumn raspberry cane will then bear a small crop of fruits in early summer. At that point it can be cut down to soil level, to make way for the later crop.

Top tip

How to grow your own nutrient-rich microgreens

✿ If you have itchy fingers desperate to sow some positive green seedlings (that you can also eat!) then there are surefire ways to bring quick relief. Microleaves are perfect for sowing at this time of year because while short, dim days can't bulk up substantial crops, they can support these tiny leaves with ease. You don't need to waste too much compost with microleaves – just sow into shallow trays (I like using these terracotta saucers) because the root system never gets a chance to grow to a good size. Make a base layer of 2cm (1in) compost, water, allow to drain, then sow hardier edibles like rocket, celery, fennel, chives, mustard, coriander, peas and parsley that really pack a flavour punch. Place the containers somewhere relatively warm (12-14°C) – I use heat mats in my greenhouse – then snip to harvest once the seedlings appear.

Right: Sow microleaves in trays

Your GARDENING FORTNIGHT

with **Lucy Chamberlain**, AG's fruit and veg expert

Why not try...?

Dandelions, really!

Lucy explains how to transform dandelion leaves into a less-bitter delight to pep up winter salads

✿ Tortoise owners will already understand how delicious dandelion leaves can be to certain creatures – so let's add ourselves to that mix! We can eat the foliage if we force it first. Forcing, by excluding light, makes the leaves taste far less bitter – they become like chicory and endive, a pleasantly sharp leaf that brings pep to winter salads. First, uproot dandelion roots from the garden, taking as much of the long taproot as possible (yes, this is the pure act of weeding them out!). Trim off any foliage and plant the roots into large tubs of soil or compost, topping the container with 2cm (1in) sand (to keep the emerging leaves clean). Water well, cover with an upturned pot to exclude light, then move to a relatively warm room. After a fortnight or so the (pale yellow) leaves will be ready to harvest.

5 quick jobs...

1 Get your brain in gear for the sowing season ahead by organising your seed packets of edibles into sowing dates. An old shoebox, Tupperware tub, sowing box or wine crate makes an excellent vessel, and monthly dividers help you easily reach for packets as and when you need them.

2 Bare-root trees, canes and bushes offer a very cost-effective way to stock up your fruit collection. They'll be delivered throughout winter – if the area they're intended for is waterlogged or frozen, temporarily 'plant' the roots into a sheltered bed, or large pots of soil or compost.

3 Having potted herbs on your kitchen windowsill throughout winter bypasses the need to dash out into a chilly or soggy garden come mealtimes. Turn the plants frequently so that they don't excessively stretch towards the light, and keep the roots moist but not waterlogged to deter rots.

4 Winter is an ideal time to lift and divide comfrey – and sterile forms such as 'Bocking 14' can only be bulked up this way, as they don't produce seed. Dividing keeps clumps vigorous and healthy – slice into 20cm (8in) diameter clumps using a spade then replant at 60cm (2ft) spacings.

5 If you didn't sow any overwintering broad beans in 2024 there's still plenty of time to gain an early crop for May or June of 2025. Sow early varieties such as 'De Monica' and 'Express' individually into 9cm (23in) diameter pots of compost, placing in a frost-free glasshouse or cool room.

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Small space | Big ideas

With **Chris Collins**, Garden Organic's Head of Horticulture

Chris explains how to grow exciting varieties of chilli at home

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How to grow sensational chilli peppers

Chris Collins reveals how to successfully care for these small space-friendly superstars

Chillies are amazing plants: their fruits (or technically berries) are grown, cropped, and have become a celebrated ingredient across the world. From the flavourful foods of Thailand and Western China to the humble 'pepe' pepper blend of West Africa (where they help preserve foodstuffs that would otherwise expire in the tropical heat), chillies are a spicy superstar.

The great news is these plants are easily grown organically in the UK from seed, and take up little room, but there are a few tips that will ensure success.

Chris and his wife Kim (pictured) grow a wide range of chillies in their London balcony garden

Feed little and often

Chillies need a long run up in our cooler temperate climate and they benefit enormously from a warm early start. Sow them in a tray of good quality peat-free seed compost in late winter, preferably in a heated propagator. Prick out at the cotyledon (two leaf) stage by gently lifting them out, holding them by their leaves only, and potting them on into their own individual pots. Keep them in a warm protected environment, such as on a windowsill.

Young chilli plants love warm, damp soil, and they will quickly put on growth as the daylight extends. Once they have six to eight leaves, they will benefit from an organic liquid feed, just a little, regularly applied. You can continue growing your chilli indoors or plant them out in a nice sunny spot, maybe into a pot on your patio or balcony come late spring.

Pinching out the growing tips helps the plants bush out, and a top-dressing or mulch of a good organic compost will really kick these plants on.

The biggest problem you may have with chillies is what to do with all the fruit! If you cannot use them all in their fresh state, lay them out on paper in a sunny spot indoors. Let them dry and cut them up fine and you'll have chilli flakes to bring your spicy dishes to life for years ahead.

For more organic gardening advice – for gardens big and small - head to **www.gardenorganic.org.uk**, where you can also find out how to support the charity by becoming a member.

Chillies can be easily grown organically

© Chris Collins

Small space Q&A

Q Can I make my own seed propagator?

A Yes, simply repurpose tomato or fruit punnets with lids. Pop drainage holes in the bottom container, place a drip tray underneath, and cap with the lid to create a mini greenhouse.

Q How do I water chillies effectively?

A It's best to water chilli plants from below, and in the morning if possible as they don't like sleeping with wet feet. As the summer progresses, reduce watering to encourage the plant to get its roots deeper and this will encourage flower and fruit production. Misting can help the fruits develop and reduce pests such as red spider mite – which like dry conditions.

Q My chillies have whitefly, how can I manage this organically?

A These tiny flies will fly about when the plant foliage is disturbed but careful removal of their young scales from the underside of the leaves by hand will soon reduce numbers. If not, bio-controls in the form of a parasitic wasp will work well, but only use these if you have large scale infestations.

No-dig, incredibly low maintenance vegetable gardening in action at Kim's climate change training gardens in west Wales

Five easy resilient resolutions

Editor **Kim Stoddart** outlines some ways to help boost results naturally for the year ahead

All images © Kim Stoddart

As we attempt to stay warm and ride out the darker, colder month ahead, please don't be too disheartened or weighed down by the gardening year just passed. It was tough, but we survived and we are hardier green-fingered folk as a result. It was a tricky but useful experience in many ways, in between moaning about the weather and the slugs, to see first hand what thrived, and what did not, in such challenging growing conditions. There were many lessons to be learnt from it all.

Ultimately, our changing climate means more erratic weather overall, so being prepared for anything is absolutely key. We will get caught out at times, of course, but the natural world can lend a generous helping hand if we allow it to do so. Here are just a few straightforward and rewarding ways to help shore up our defences in 2025:

Allow more self-seeding plants

There are limits to this of course, as some varieties can become a little over-zealous in their spreading ways and dominant, to the detriment of other plants, but self-seeding varieties can be useful. In the vegetable garden the likes of rocket, parsley (in its second year as a biennial) and nasturtium all make good edible allies that can provide ground cover around other plants as well. Seedlings can be moved about as needed.

Flower-wise, some of the easier self-seeders include poppy, calendula, forget-me-nots, aquilegia and verbena. Just allow them to spread where it won't cause issues for your garden, and where you are happy for them to explore and appear.

Otherwise, saving seed from many edibles (such as easy-to-save-from lettuce, pea, French bean, tomato, chilli, rocket and radish) will help enable you to obtain seed more adapted to your own area.

Build ground-up protection

Make your soil the best it can be with home-made compost and mulches, in addition to any shop-brought supplies, and your plants will thank you for it.

Less really is most certainly more when it comes to disturbing the soil in our gardens, unless you have a serious issue with soil compaction. No-dig (or little-dig) will help the soil ecosystem to build and prosper, to the benefit of your garden. Such an improved natural soil structure is better able to cope with periods of heavy rain and drought, and plants growing within it benefit from the slow-release fertile goodness. They will also be helped by the mycorrhizal support systems that bind themselves to plant roots to help them access deeper food and water reserves from below.

By not feeding and watering annual plants in the ground so readily, they are more likely to spread their roots further, enabling them to access all the natural

Calendula and nasturtium are self-seeding vegetable garden allies

goodies in the soil and become more resilient overall as a result.

Learn from forest gardening

There is much to be learnt from the mixed ecosystem of trees, shrubs and plants which grow in layers, offering support and connectivity above and below ground. In even a small way, the mix of planting in your garden can provide many instant benefits and protections from topsy-turvy weather. Growing taller plants such as Jerusalem artichoke or edible hedging around the outside of a vegetable garden can slow the flow of wind, while different layers of planting can make it harder for so-called pests to find what they are after.

It doesn't have to be exacting either, and even the use of some different types of plants from different plant families, when planted together, can provide protection. Crops mixed in with flowers, edible herb ground cover around shrubs... just work with what you have, and what you like to eat.

Free-spirited layered mixed planting provides greater weather and pest protection

For example, in my gardens I grow fruit trees, willow and hedging as a protective barrier around the outside of my vegetable garden. Then in beds and borders I mix and match, leaving at least 2m (7ft) between crops from the same family, such as tomatoes and potatoes, and growing lots of lettuce and herbs in between. This helps prevent the spread of airborne disease such as blight, boosts biodiversity and helps with natural pest control. It also creates an attractive foraging aesthetic which is low-maintenance and attractive to boot.

Savvy seed sowing

As we can no longer rely on seasonality as we used to do, the succession sowing that Bob Flowerdew outlines on page 66 is absolutely the way to go. Regular-and-often sowings also save time in the moment and allow you to potentially spread the risk and extend the crop growing season overall. It helps avoid the classic all-at-once glut scenario because you are widening the window of seasonal growth. Having some form of make-shift protection (plastic covers, cold frames or suchlike) that can be added to raised beds also helps the gardener work around challenging extremities as they arise.

Working with freely available materials

It feels so incredibly good to turn the surplus and waste into something wondrous. It saves money and can boost results in the process. This is inner resilience as much as anything else and I highly recommend the transformation and use of local materials at each and every opportunity. Andrew Oldham talks about stone on his pages, and this is a material I also use as an impromptu ground cover and plant support on veg beds throughout the season (I wouldn't recommend this though if you have an issue with slugs), and Ruth Hayes discusses uses of cardboard, another incredibly handy material on page 8.

Why not see what else you can find in your garden that has the potential to come in handy. Please do write in and share any favourite free resource suggestions, we'd love to hear.

Above: You can also protect seedlings with makeshift coldframes such as this salvaged window (just be careful if using glass)

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Three home-grown sugar replacements

Expert Barbara Segall reveals how sweet cicely, stevia and yacon can be grown and used to help reduce processed sugar intakes

All images unless otherwise credited: Barbara Segall

Barbara uses sweet cicely with rhubarb and other sharp-tasting fruit

Sweet cicely (*Myrrhis odorata*)

With a sweet and slightly aniseed flavour, this is my go-to plant for adding zip to a leafy salad and it is a perfect companion for sharp, acidic fruits including rhubarb. You could say that sweet cicely's aromatic fern-like foliage makes it the slimmer's plant of choice. I cook handfuls of its leaves with rhubarb and it goes a long way to sweeten or at least lessen the tart flavour.

When the rhubarb crowns in the garden start to send up strong stems ready for picking, I check the several clumps of sweet cicely to see how much new leaf there is. Sweet cicely is a hardy perennial and in severe winters it may die back. In spring its soft feathery new foliage is ideal for adding to fruit to be poached or roasted. Because I avoid sugar if at all possible, it is a bonus that sweet cicely reduces the acidity of rhubarb and any other sharp-tasting fruit that you might wish to add sugar to when poaching.

Above: **Sweet cicely is Barbara's main go-to plant for natural sweetness**

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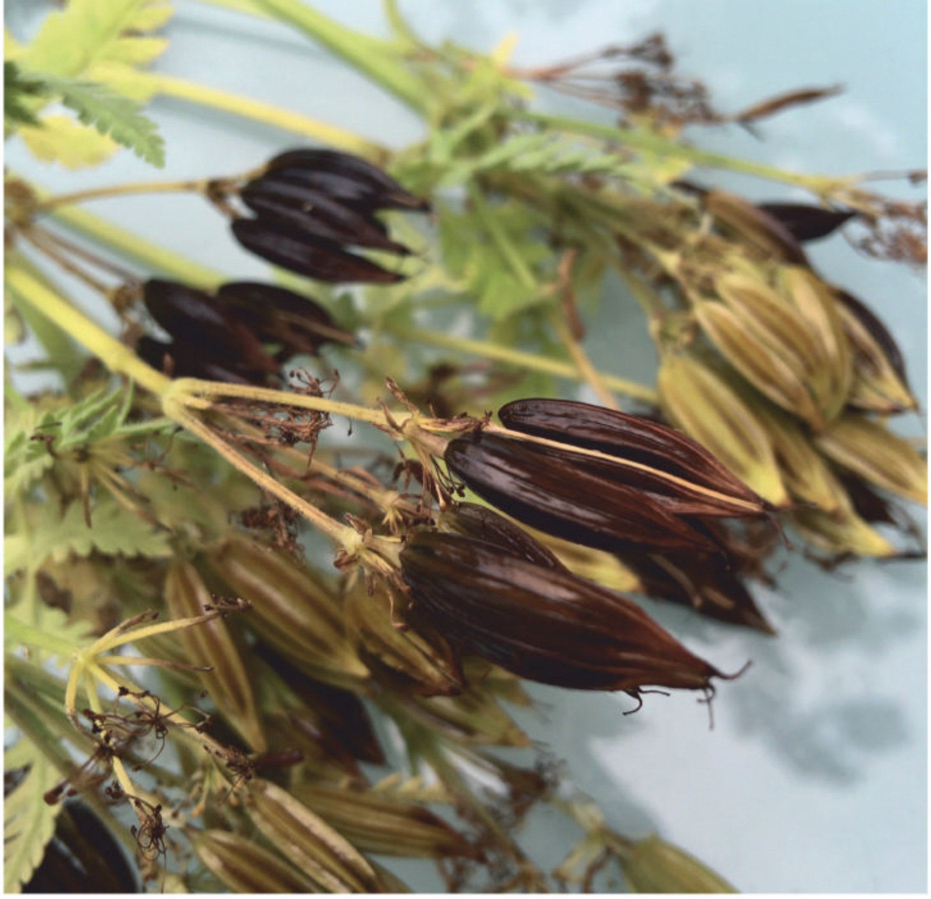

Home-saved sweet cicely seed

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How to use the plant as a sugar reducer

People say that you can reduce by half the amount of sugar you would normally add, but that doesn't affect the way I prepare the dish as I always cook rhubarb without sugar, with the addition of a few sprigs or a handful of foliage to the rhubarb. I add sliced oranges for extra flavour and a small amount of water, not even to cover the rhubarb. I let it simmer, with a lid on, gently for about 10 minutes so that the rhubarb keeps its shape, or I roast it in a low oven.

Above: The foliage of sweet cicely has been used since medieval times and has a aniseed or liquorice-like flavour

Above: Barbara purchases young plants each year and plants out for multiple fresh pickings

How to buy plants and seed

Sweet cicely plants are often difficult to source and buy, but it certainly is worth seeking them out or sowing yourself. I have purchased plants from specialist nurseries, such as Herbal Haven and Hooks Green Herbs or sown seed from the plants in the garden or obtained seed from several seed companies. Chiltern Seeds (www.chilternseeds.co.uk), Jekka's Herbs (www.Jekka.com) and Kings Seeds (www.kingsseeds.com) are three that do stock sweet cicely seed.

Growing sweet cicely

Sweet cicely grows to a height of 60–90cm and in spring and early summer produces large umbels of small white flowers that provide good nectar for pollinators. The foliage was used in medieval times as a strewing plant because of its aniseed scent. The flowers are followed by large green seeds that ripen to jet black. Like the foliage the seeds have an aniseed or liquorice flavour. The licorice tasting seeds were used in Tudor times as soothers for teething children. I always cut the flower stems back after flowering to prevent self-seeding and to ensure new leaf growth for late summer use. If you do leave it to set seed, then you can use the seeds for their aniseed flavour in cooked fruit dishes and for flavouring beef or venison casseroles.

I sow the seeds in pots in autumn and keep them over winter in a cold frame as the seeds need stratifying. When all frost danger is over, I plant up the seedlings. I have lifted and divided plants in spring. It grows well in partial shade in well-drained soil.

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Above: The lovely leaves of stevia are incredibly sweet and great as a calorie-free sweetener

Poached pears with stevia foliage and basil 'African Blue'

Stevia (*Stevia rebaudiana*)

I first saw stevia growing in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden herb garden in the US in the 1980s. Its leaves have been used for centuries around the world as a sweetener and in recent years it has been sold in the UK as young plants and as seed. Its common names – sweet herb of Paraguay or candy plant – give a clue as to how sweet its taste is. It is estimated that it is 200 times sweeter than sugar and in addition it is calorie-free.

Stevia comes from Brazil and Paraguay where it has traditionally used by the Guaraní people as a medicine, a sweetener for the bitter yerba maté tea (made from *Ilex paraguarensis* leaves) or simply as a sweet chew. Processed sweeteners made from stevia compounds are readily available commercially, but it is unlikely that the Guaraní receive any share of profits earned from the use of their basic knowledge.

Stevia 'syrup' frozen into ice cubes

Growing for more leaves

Stevia can be grown from seed but my preference is to purchase young stevia plants annually and to harvest and use the leaves straight from the garden. I pot on the young plants and then plant them outdoors into large containers or into raised beds for the summer when the danger of frost has passed. As I want a good crop of leaves, I nip out the flower buds of the young plants when they are growing well to encourage more leaf production and a bushy shape.

Then in autumn I pot them up once more and usually try to overwinter them in the frost-free greenhouse, but I am not always successful. Oliver Clifton-Sprigg of Norfolk Herbs, one of the herb nurseries that grow and sell stevia plants, suggested that "keeping them on the dry side of moist and in full sun in the greenhouse may make a difference", so that is my aim for this year's plants.

How to use stevia leaves

Leaves can be used fresh in tea or coffee in place of sugar. The advice is usually that it is best to harvest them and hang them in bunches to dry. Once they are dry, you can crush or crumble them and store them until needed in dried form. I have never done this as I prefer to use the freshly picked leaves when poaching fruit, or I make a 'syrup'. I add a handful of leaves to water and bring it to the boil, then remove the leaves and either use the sweet 'syrup' fresh or I freeze it for later use. Some stevia enthusiasts steep the leaves in hot water and leave it overnight to use the next day.

Oliver also told me that when the company first started selling stevia, customers were unsure about it and he did some research on the plant and how to use it. I was intrigued by the recipe on the Norfolk Herbs website for making a longer-lasting syrup. He suggests steeping the chopped/crushed leaves in a saucepan containing alcohol (highest proof as possible). Then leaving this overnight before adding water and simmering until the alcohol is removed. The resultant syrup is up to 200 times sweeter than sugar. Something to try with my next harvest in 2025!

▶

Barbara's avourite yacon and herb salad

Yacon and blueberries for breakfast

Yacon

I have been growing yacon (*Smallanthus sonchifolius*) tubers since 2015 when I bought my first plants from Pennard Plants (www.pennardplantscom). I always dig up the tubers in late autumn or early winter to harvest them. I keep one or two main tubers from each plant that I store in a frost-free site (as you would overwinter dahlia tubers). The rest I prepare for eating fresh or for freezing.

Ideas for using yacon

My favourite use is in salads where I combine it with walnuts, cucumbers, salad leaves, herbs and cheese. It has a crunchy texture and a fresh taste. It is useful as it takes on flavours from oils and vinegars.

If you boil the tubers and reduce the liquid down to a syrup, you will have a liquid that is low in sugar and very useful for low-carb, low-sugar diets. I haven't had a large enough tuber harvest to make this worthwhile, so I wash, peel and chop some of the tubers into cubes and store them in the freezer. Eventually I use them, defrosted, with fruit, in a healthy low-sugar, low-carb breakfast bowl.

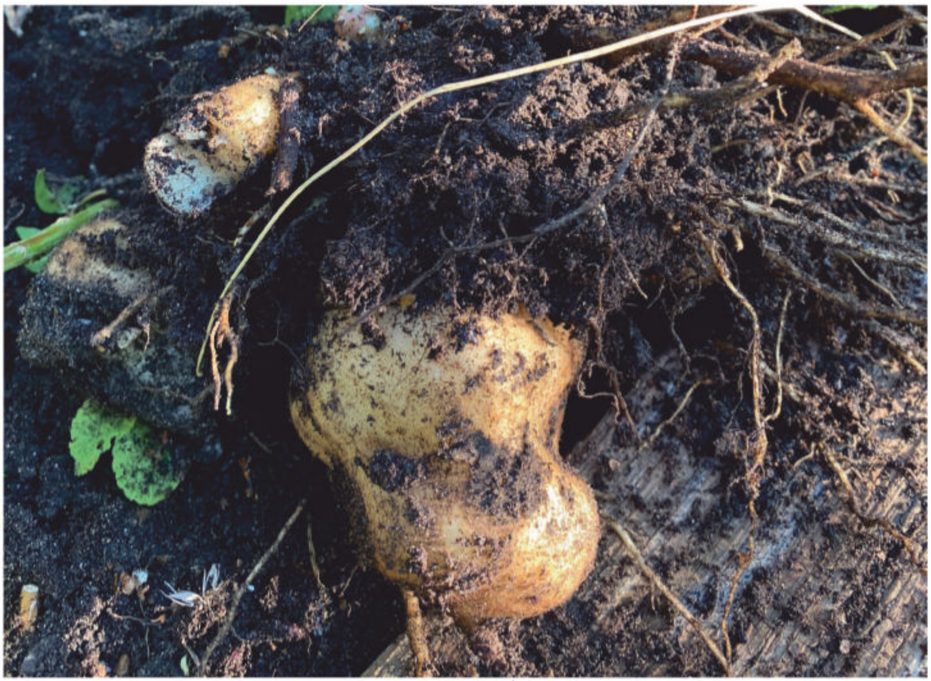
Chopped yacon pieces ready to freeze

Whether they are used fresh, frozen or made into syrup, they are low in carbs and sugar.

Growing yacon

I replant the stored tubers in spring and they will eventually regrow to an approximate height of 2m (6ft). They do best in sun or part-shade and in a hot summer they will produce daisy-like yellow or orange flowers, similar to sunflowers.

Yacon, blueberries and cape gooseberries



Lifting yacon to harvest the lovely tubers

Cheers! How to be merry with mocktails

Ellen Mary explains how to help keep winter blues and sniffles at bay with some delicious drinks

New year, new you! How many times have you said that in January, or felt pressure to do so? Although it can help with motivation towards behavioural change, it also brings forth extra potential for disappointment if it's hard to keep up. This is why I prefer to make small changes throughout the year, which are more likely to stick, and I can do so at my own pace.

At this time of year, the most important thing to do is keep yourself well and get outside in the garden, go for walks as much as possible, eat a balanced diet of fresh food and fruit and vegetables to help beat the winter lurgies and keep your mind in good shape through the quieter, darker days of the year.

So why not give your immune system a boost with some tantalising drinks which also happen to be full of vitamins and plenty of herbs and flowers? Making them also provides a perfect excuse to pop to the garden for a few sprigs of rosemary, and brings forth the joy of garnishing a healthy mocktail with an edible orchid flower or two. It is simple a lovely and meaningful way to start the new year.

Start the new year with some lovely uplifting and healthy drinks made with home-grown ingredients

Above: Ellen explains how to make a lovely healthy mocktail

All images unless otherwise credited: Ellen Mary

Vitamin boosting orange and rosemary mocktail

Rosemary is a superb culinary herb for its distinct flavour and reputed immune-boosting properties, helping your body to fight infections.

Since it can be harvested all year, why not add it to a healthy January drink and keep the winter sniffles away? It does have a little more flavour during summer, but personally I can find it overpowering at times, so I enjoy the toned down flavour during winter.

There are many ways to use rosemary, including infusing in oil, roasting with root vegetables and making rosemary tea, but let's get a Vitamin C boost with an orange mocktail to brighten up January.

1 Make a simple rosemary syrup by combining 100g of granulated sugar, at least four sprigs of rosemary and 120ml of water in a saucepan. Bring to the boil, stirring until the sugar is dissolved. Leave for at least 10 minutes, then strain the mixture to remove the rosemary sprigs and store it in the fridge.

Make rosemary syrup to flavour your drink with the herby goodness

2 In your mocktail glass, add some ice cubes, apple slices and orange juice to about 1/4 full, then add a tablespoon of the rosemary syrup and a squeeze of lemon juice and add a mixer of choice such as soda water or lemonade.

3 Add garnishes such as a big sprig of rosemary and an orchid flower.

Rosemary is a fantastic culinary ingredient with many beneficial properties

Winter rosemary care

Rosemary (*Salvia rosmarinus*) is packed full of medicinal properties: it contains vitamins and antioxidants and is an anti-inflammatory, making it useful to have in the garden.

With a long and fascinating history of uses, rosemary is native to the Mediterranean and sunny spots, growing along rocky hills near the coast. As an evergreen perennial shrub with pretty purple flowers, it can be harvested all year for a fresh or dried herbal boost.

'Blue Lagoon' has deeper blue flowers than other varieties and 'Roman Beauty' is both long flowering and great for containers.

Antioxidant-packed butterfly pea tea with orchid garnish

In this warm cup of tea, butterfly pea (*Clitoria ternatea*) flowers will colour the water and the orchid garnish will add to the tropical vibe.

Butterfly pea is a fascinating flower to use in the kitchen as the colour changes depending on the pH, turning from blue to purple or even lighter when anything acidic is added. Widely used in Vietnam and Thailand, it's anti-inflammatory and antiviral, full of antioxidants, and it boosts the immune system.

Butterfly pea can be grown in the UK in a warm conservatory or heated greenhouse that's at least 20C, with a south-facing window.

Some top tips for growing

- Rosemary doesn't grow well in wet, poorly drained soil. If you are growing it in pots or containers, ensure the compost has good drainage with holes in the bottom and lift it onto pot feet or bricks, especially over winter.

- Even well-established rosemary bushes will be thankful for a mulch. As long as the ground isn't waterlogged or frozen, give it a thick mulch with some well-rotted organic matter to protect the roots over the winter months.

Lemon juice changes the purple colour of butterfly pea flower tea to blue.

Dried butterfly pea flowers are used to make this tea

Edible orchid flowers can be bought or grown, do check first that the variety of orchid you are using is edible.

1 Boil the kettle (you could also warm up some oat milk if you'd prefer a milky drink) and grab your favourite mug. Add in some dried butterfly pea flowers, as many as you fancy. The more you use, the darker the colour will be, but even just four or five will immediately colour the water.

2 Add the hot water and leave to steep as the water changes colour to blue. Grab a slice of lemon, give it a squeeze into the water and watch the colour change.

3 Top with an orchid flower (don't forget to nibble it and see what you think), put your feet up and relax...the new year has begun!

* always check with your doctor before using any herbal remedies.
As with any edible plant, do not consume dyed flowers or any that have been exposed to chemicals.

Winter orchid care

Orchids are one of the most popular houseplants because the flowers are simply stunning and they are readily available to buy.

Dendrobium and phalaenopsis are the most commonly grown at home, but there are about 28,000 species, most of which have flowers considered edible (although a few may well cause stomach discomfort so do double check).

Orchids have been used medicinally for centuries to help cure coughs and colds, gum disease and digestive issues. Edible orchid flowers can be bought, and I use the odd one or two flowers from an orchid I have grown as a garnish to brighten up a cake, salad or mocktail.

Some top tips for growing

- Check the roots before watering. Green, plump roots mean they are just fine, grey roots mean they need to be watered. When giving them a drink, let the water drain all the way through before putting your plant back in place.

- Do not use freezing cold water on them! Orchids are epiphytes native to Southeast Asia where they do not get watered with ice! I liken this to being comfortable, warm, sipping a hot chocolate and someone unexpectedly chucking a bucket of ice water over you. No one needs that, certainly not in winter!

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THE NATURAL FORAGER'S GARDEN

With expert broadcaster, author and long-standing *AG* columnist, **Anne Swithinbank**

Two earthy treats and a timely prune

Anne is thinking about artichokes and spuds, and tackling overgrown apple trees

Tall brown stems showed Anne where to dig for a harvest of Jerusalem artichokes
Inset: **Self-seeded perpetual spinach grows wild and free**

In a robust kitchen garden where plants are allowed to creep about or go to seed, there will always be surprises. In and around the hop beds once tended by our fully fledged son, vegetables have gone feral. There are pale green rosettes of self-seeded perpetual spinach and, pointing the way to buried treasure, the brown stems of Jerusalem artichokes. Many years have passed since I bothered to lift, sort and replant their tubers but these stalwart perennial vegetables have continued to thrive. Their slightly sweet, nutty flavoured tubers are delicious, but are also notorious for benefiting our bodies but sometimes embarrassing us with their digestive system-boosting powers, but I've heard that pickling can help.

A new year is the time to make lists of seed potatoes. Last year's crop was good here, probably due to summer rainfall, but had I not picked slugs and snails from the emerging haulms every evening at bed time, I'm convinced they'd have been defoliated. Fortunately, the tubers survived and we were self-sufficient in delicious spuds for about four months.

With nearly two acres to look after, pruning apple trees has fallen off the to-do list in recent years. The cordons get their summer pruning to keep them in shape but our orchard trees are a mass of congested branches. Yet nobody prunes them in nature and to me, they are more beautiful than the over- or badly-pruned trees one often sees. Lichen-encrusted, they continue to blossom and fruit well but this year I'm determined to attempt a little thinning.

How to grow... Jerusalem artichokes

Puzzlingly, the Jerusalem artichoke (*Helianthus tuberosus*) comes from North America and Canada and is related to the sunflower (*H.annuus*). The story goes that having been introduced to Italy where sunflowers are known as *girasole*, the English mispronounced this as 'Jerusalem'. Grow them and you'll notice small yellow sunflower-like heads opening at the tops of their tall stems during late summer and autumn.

These are almost ridiculously easy to grow. They thrive on neglect and are even happy to grow in difficult north-facing spots.

In February or March, choose a bed of free-draining soil and order tubers or save some from the greengrocer. Ideally they should be medium-sized, or you can cut long ones in half. Plant them 13cm (5in) deep and 30cm (12in) apart in rows 90cm (3ft) apart and leave them to it. You'll find instructions to give them a midsummer chop (for keeping height down), earthing up and staking, but I leave ours to their own devices.

As tubers are easy to leave behind, these artichokes are a potential spreader, so restrict them to one bed. On thin, sandy soils they will benefit from mulching with well-rotted garden compost a couple of times a year. Ours grow on improved clay and receive a natural mulch of beech leaves from the hedge.

Low-maintenance Jerusalem artichokes are a forager's friend, just grow them where you don't mind plants spreading

Tubers don't store well out of the ground and are best lifted as required during the winter months. Wise growers wait for a few frosts, as the indigestible starch inulin gradually converts to fructose, but even so, begin by eating small quantities before letting loose with soups and gratins around friends and family.

They should grow well in containers by setting a couple of tubers into a 30cm (12in) wide pot of good peat-free compost. I'm new to pickling so I read a few recipes before adding to a pan about 300ml of vinegar (half white wine and half apple cider), four tablespoons of water, a squeeze of lemon juice, 30g of sugar, some mustard seeds and five large tubers cut into slices. This was brought to a rapid boil, then removed immediately to cool. I ate a fair few crunchy disks at once, then sealed the rest in sterilised jars covered with vinegar and glass lids.

All images unless otherwise credited: John Swithinbank

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Step by step Growing and using Jerusalem artichokes

1 Foraged Jerusalem artichokes are best harvested after a few frosts

2 Pick when needed to keep them fresh and then wash before cooking

3 Pickled Jerusalem artichokes are supposed to be less wind-inducing for the kitchen gardener

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4 Grow Jerusalem artichokes in a dedicated spot. They make a good windbreak on the edge of a garden

5 Plant out tubers from late winter to spring for your own home-grown supply of tasty tubers

Try these... Jerusalem artichoke varieties

'Papas'
A new variety suitable for smaller gardens and containers because stems reach only 1.5m (5ft). I haven't tried this but the tubers look neat and presentable too. *www.pennardplants.com*

'Fuseau'
I'm sure this is the cultivar I started off with many years ago. The long tubers are less knobbly than most and easy to skin using a potato peeler. *www.victoriananursery.co.uk*

'Gerard'
If you'd like a red-skinned artichoke, this French variety will deliver. They look quite knobbly and their flesh is white but they could be roasted in their skins. *www.tamarorganics.co.uk*

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It is time to start getting excited about early potato varieties to grow

Choosing potatoes

Last year I chose potatoes based on their attractive flowers but was disappointed by 'Maris Peer'. This variety is well-known for giving a good display of lightly fragrant violet-purple blooms, but only a few of my plants flowered well. There has to be a reason and I'm going to blame myself for planting them slightly too deeply. That, combined with good soil and regular rainfall, meant they produced lots of tasty salad potatoes but could have put them off flowering.

I stick to early and second early potato varieties because as long as I plant them promptly, they will have formed a good crop of tubers before blight strikes. This year's list starts with my favourite spud 'Nadine'. Her rounded tubers have firm, creamy flesh with a sweet, nutty flavour and are great boiled or sautéed. I was once told that 'Nadine' is very much a potato of the south and apparently the firm flesh turns almost slimy in colder, more northerly regions.

I was born in Belvedere in Kent, south of the Thames, and I don't think I've ever gardened north of it, so like 'Nadine', I'm a proper southerner. I married a Lancastrian (although I think the Swithinbanks were originally from Yorkshire) but I've never grown potatoes up there. I usually grow three varieties and the other two will be salad types, so maybe flavoursome 'Charlotte' and versatile, productive, 'Jazzy'.

Above: Anne lifting her favourite potato ' Nadine' last year

Apple tree pruning

The first step with pruning my apple trees is a good walk around to assess what's going on, decide which branches to tackle and then where to make the first cut. I love my romantic, overgrown trees decked with intricate pale green lichens. These might look plant-like but exist as a symbiotic partnership between a fungus providing the structure and an alga making food. They cause no harm to the trees and don't enter them or take anything from them, as a parasite like mistletoe would.

I was excited to spot a tree creeper, as although they frequent our garden, these are shy birds. I targeted the 'Crispin' and warmed up by sawing off a few small dead and crossing branches, eventually identifying a long, long branch weaving its way through the centre of the tree.

I lopped away the extremities to lighten its load, then made for the centre of the tree brandishing my saw. The removal of one more large branch will be enough for this year.

Above: Having decided which branch to thin out, Anne begins by reducing its length to take the weight off it, then makes a final cut just short of the collar or slight swelling where the branch meets the trunk
Inset: Lichens are beautiful living organisms created between a fungus and an alga. Small invertebrates often live amongst them, offering food for birds

‘**TURMERIC+** worked wonders’ says Pauline

Semi-retired photographer Pauline Rook, 73, living in Somerset, tells how Turmeric+ changed her life.

‘It was very good, and worked wonders’

‘Both my mother and my grandmother had experienced discomfort in their joints during their lives and my knees were beginning to wake me up in the night and I wanted to do something proactively to try and help myself.

‘Turmeric was recommended and a nutritionist suggested I make a not very tasty drink, which I didn’t fancy at all. So when I saw an advertisement for Turmeric+ from FutureYou Cambridge I thought I’d try that instead.

‘It was very good, and worked wonders, but I thought it was a little expensive, so I stopped and tried a cheaper one. My knee started playing up again, so I went back to it. That was about 10 years ago and I’ve not had a problem since.’

Turmeric contains compounds called curcuminoids, the most notable of which is curcumin. Not only is curcumin responsible for turmeric’s distinctive yellow colour but it’s also what makes it such a powerful spice.

However curcumin is difficult for the body to absorb so the scientists at FutureYou Cambridge used a patented Curcuma Phospholipid Complex formulation to make Turmeric+, 30 times more absorbable than standard turmeric. They also added vitamin C, which contributes to normal collagen formation for the normal function of cartilage and vitamin D, which contributes to the maintenance of normal bones and maintenance of normal muscle function.

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Pauline continues: ‘Recently I was dinghy racing, I’m by far the oldest active dinghy woman sailor in the club, but even after hanging over the toe straps in rough seas, my knees were fine. Turmeric+ has helped me live the life I want, fully mobile and no discomfort at night.’

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Our award-winning editor, Kim Stoddart, explains why a subscription to Amateur Gardening makes sense:

Since our re-launch in 2023, AG has gone from strength to strength. Readers tell us how much they appreciate its mix of practical advice, money saving tips, regular features and respected columnists (including Bob Flowerdew, John Negus, Ruth Hayes and Anne Swithinbank) who supply expert gardening guidance in every issue. Readers also enjoy our focus on future-thinking and ecologically sound methods of gardening.

Subscribing to the magazine means you'll never miss an issue, plus you'll save significantly on the shop price. So why not take advantage of this special offer and make AG your 2025 constant gardening companion?"

Happy gardening,

Kim x

P.S. we were proud to be winners at the recent Garden Media Guild Awards!

Kim Stoddart, editor.
Winner: Practical Gardening Journalist of the Year

Toby Buckland:
Gardening Columnist of the Year

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Mike advises some care and consideration when it comes to sowing flower seed for the year ahead

Sowing the seeds of love

Mike Palmer shares his seed-sowing secrets

All images unless otherwise credited: Mike Palmer

Happy new year fellow gardeners and welcome to 2025, which promises to be our best gardening season ever (we hope). Weeks before the sobering chimes of Big Ben rang in the new year, I'd drawn up a list of resolutions. Lose a stone - at least, cut out cake, exercise more, and... sow not a single seed 'til March arrives, opening the old, wooden garden gate that sees us gallivanting joyously towards spring.

Depending upon where you live and local weather conditions, then heated propagators, cold frames and greenhouses may allow you to steal a cautious head start, but with only select seed varieties that are needing or tolerant of cooler, earlier starts.

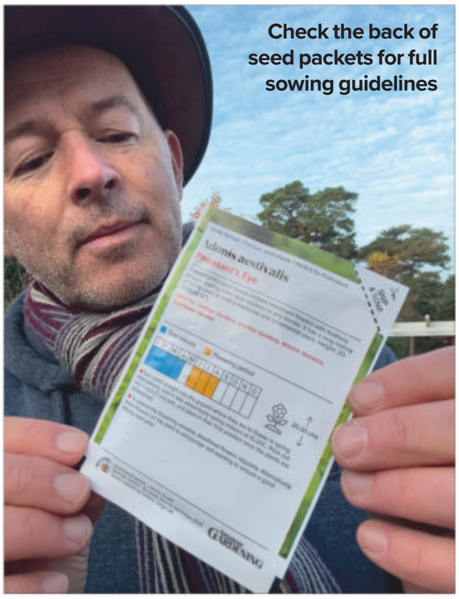
Above: **Mike getting prepared by cleaning seed trays thoroughly on a bright, dry day**

Despite the desperately itchy gardening fingers that January always brings, the majority of my collection of *Amateur Gardening* seed packets will not be pulled from their air-tight abode until late February or early March, with just a few exceptions. But, before then, please allow me to share with you my seed-sowing secrets, while you sip on a healthy green tea and, oh go on then, the incy-winciest slice of Christmas cake. It is cold after all!

The benefits of waiting awhile for most seed sowing

To breathe life into seeds successfully, specific light and heat conditions need to be provided, alongside water, humidity and oxygen. It's difficult enough for us, at times, to motivate ourselves to poke a chilled and dripping nose out of the front door in the short, cold, and grey days of January and February, so why should the

Use a good quality peat-free seed compost, leaving a 5mm gap at the top



Check the back of seed packets for full sowing guidelines

Sow seeds thinly to help prevent 'damping off' disease

> **'Why should the shoots of tender plants poke out their noses in cold January?'**

© Shutterstock

tender green shoots of immature plants be any different?

And it's not just the cold that will stunt germination. Even if I could afford to notch the thermostat on the landing up to a tropical 20°C, seed trays sat on the brightest, most southerly facing windowsill will still be starved of the all-important high levels of daylight that are bright enough to kick-start healthy growth.

So, fellow gardeners, work around your home and the indoor growing conditions you have available, and what you like to grow. Chillies benefit from an early start and other plants can be gently germinated under cover with heat, but why not leave the majority of your seed packets for a few more weeks, and get a head start by nipping outside, collecting your seed-sowing tools, seed trays and propagation paraphernalia and join me for a winter wash-up instead!

Spring clean

If like me you're still keen to scratch that seed-sowing itch, then, like the good Boy Scout that I never was, employ the motto 'Be Prepared'. Cleanliness is vital to ensure successful seed sowing as any pathogens, viruses or similar nasties potentially lurking under the rims or within seed trays need to be eradicated before compost comes into contact with them.

A good scrub with an old nail brush or washing up loofah in warm, soapy water will do the job. On a bright day, an old washing up bowl, or a trug, placed on a garden table or seat is the ideal way to complete this somewhat messy job, but if that's not an option, or poor weather dictates otherwise, please keep any 'significant others' onside by laying out old tea towels on kitchen worktops to keep them clean. And a word of warning: from painful experience, treating seed trays to a quick ride in the dishwasher is not a relationship-enhancing manoeuvre!

On your marks, get set... SOW

Fast forward to late February-early March when conditions for some seeds should be ideal – check the prevailing weather conditions first and read the backs of seed packets for full instructions about preferred growing conditions. Here are my top tips for success:

1 Good drainage is important for seed germination. If the compost is too wet, seeds may rot; if it's too dry they'll sit petulantly and refuse to perform. It's important to use a good

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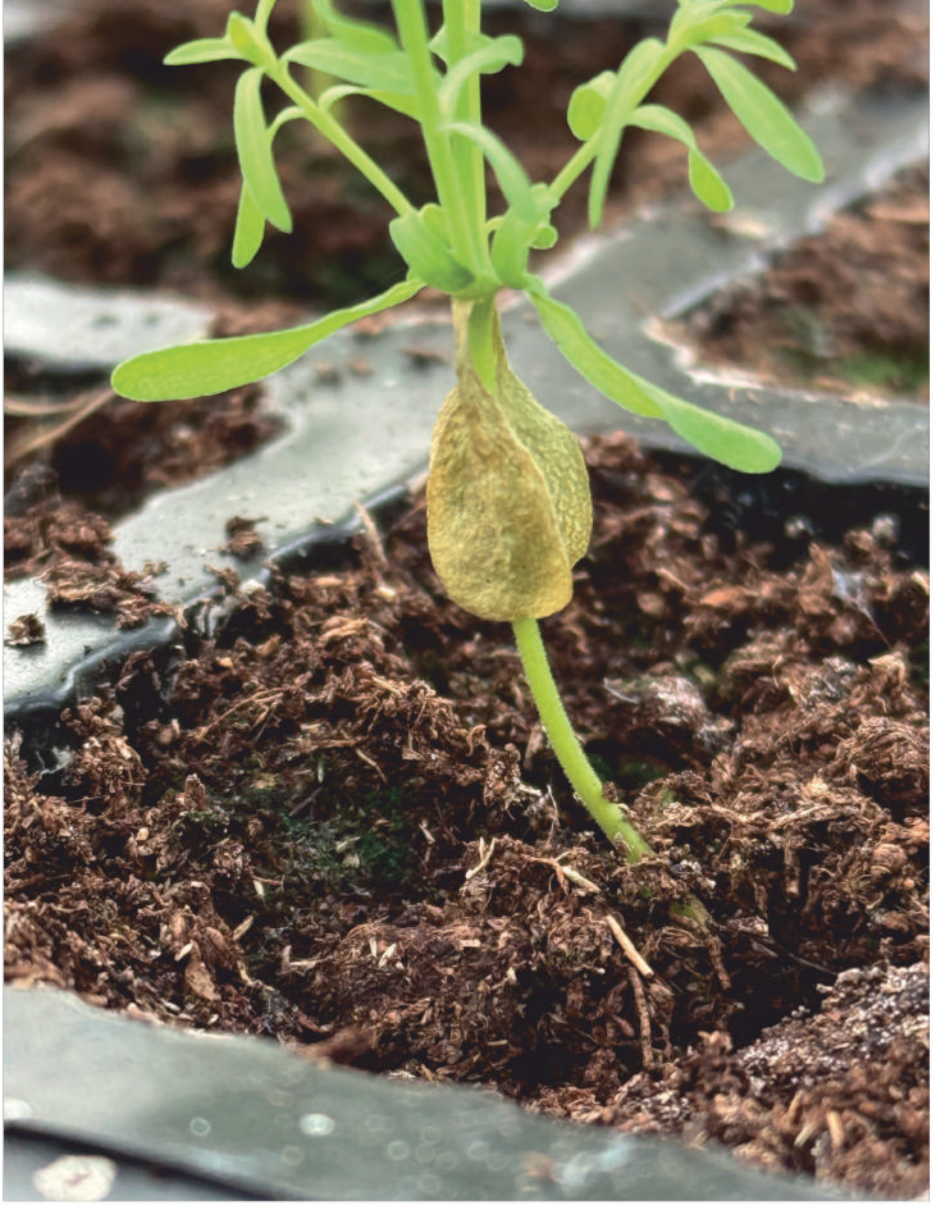
When sowing seed also make sure you have room to protect seedlings from cold during winter



The first leaves are 'seed leaves and provide food for the juvenile plant but will eventually shrivel away

quality peat-free seed compost which will provide optimum drainage. Fill seed trays to approximately 5mm below the rim, as if the compost is too shallow for the developing roots, the seedlings will eventually flop over, top-heavy, onto the surface of the compost.

2 Sit filled seed trays in a tray of warm water until the surface of the compost is moist.

3 Sow seeds thinly on the surface. As lovely as it would be to have 200 foxglove plants, I sadly don't have room in my borders, and densely sown seedlings are prone to a disease known as 'damping off', in layman's terms, rotting. Less is most definitely more. If more seedlings are needed, sow more in a separate tray, or at a later date.

4 If you have seed trays with clear plastic lids, use them as they will encourage humidity and warmth, while maintaining good natural light levels.

5 Ensure the compost remains just slightly moist. Even when seedlings emerge, their delicate root systems are as fine as baby hair and will be prone to rotting if conditions are too wet.

6 When seedlings emerge, ensure there is adequate air flow around them to prevent the aforementioned 'damping off'. Slide open air vents on lids or remove the lids altogether.

7 Windowsills make great seed sowing locations but do remember to turn seed trays daily to ensure your seedlings are not drawn to one side as they reach for daylight.

Transplanting seedlings

The first leaves that a seed produces are 'seed leaves' or cotyledons, looking nothing like the plant's eventual foliage. They provide nourishment for the juvenile plant: the horticultural equivalent of a rusk! But, they don't photosynthesise and will eventually turn yellow/brown and disappear - that's quite normal.

The next set of leaves are 'true leaves' that do photosynthesize and look like miniature versions of the adult foliage. When at least two pairs of these leaves have fully extended, it's time to re-home our seedlings, a process called 'pricking out'. Gently disturb the compost with an old wooden chopstick, or a pencil, to loosen the seedlings and then, holding a seed leaf, carefully pull the seedling, using your chopstick or pencil to ease it from the compost, and pot it on into a slightly larger pot of peat-free, multi-purpose compost where it will grow away.

Can I sow seeds now?

Early season seed germination without the aid of a heated propagator or cold frame will be erratic, at best. I've successfully sown the white gaura *Oenothera lindheimeri* 'The Bride' on a windowsill in January, but subsequent sowings in March soon caught up with the first batch and proved healthier. Patience, my lovely friends, for the majority of flower seeds especially is a virtue.

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Above: Make your seed sowing work for you in a guilt-free but effective way

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Rosie's resilient gardening series

How to make useful things out of pallets

Save money and resources with inspiring hands-on gardener Rosie Irving in this new series

A happy new year and a big warm winter welcome to you all. In this series I'll be sharing with you step-by-step instructions on how to make a wide range of different, useful and beautiful items for the garden using a selection of found and unwanted objects, together with a host of horticultural top tips and perfect plant combinations to boot.

Why call it 'Rosie's Resilient Gardening Series'?

Well, one meaning of the word 'resilient' is to be able to withstand or recover quickly from difficult situations. In 2023 I was diagnosed with two different types of cancer and during the ensuing and continuing treatment I've found that being outside in nature is a constant source of joy and comfort.

So within this series I'll draw on my recent experiences and share with you my thoughts on how these various projects can have a positive effect on our collective wellbeing and happiness.

I'm a horticultural producer for TV garden programmes and have spent the past 14 years working on numerous TV garden makeovers, coming up with different garden design ideas and projects, as well as finding the perfect plants to bring the newly made-over gardens to life.

Within this series, I'll combine my experience of up-cycling and design with my love of plants and a bargain, to share with you a wide and varied range of practical projects that can be done at a time of year when we might otherwise be tempted to stay inside the house.

As an added bonus, getting outside and active can boost our feeling of wellbeing and free our minds from daily stresses.

Pallet projects

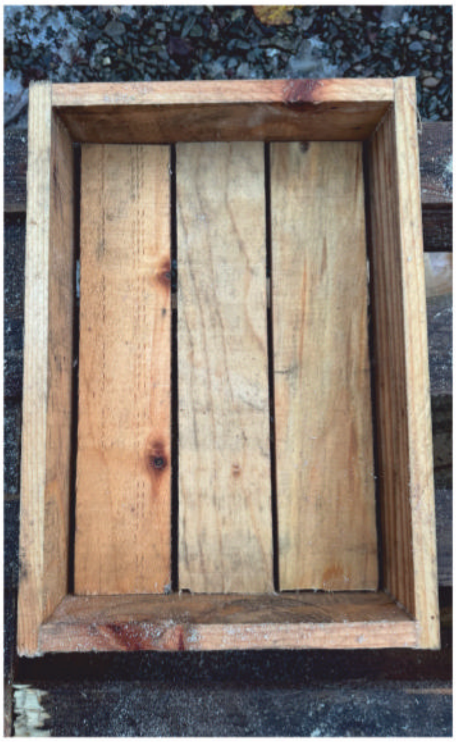
I love making garden items from pallet wood. They look and feel good, are substantial and make me feel all warm and fuzzy knowing that I'm creating something useful and long-lasting from a natural material.

Here are four different pallet projects designed to work off any festive season excesses and, in the process, boost emotional and mental wellbeing.

Home-made seed tray

What you'll need

- A wood pallet with planks approximately 7.5cm (3in) wide
- Hand saw
- Tape measure
- Pencil
- 30mm screws
- Cordless screwdriver (known as an impact driver) or Phillips screwdriver
- Drill with a 3.5mm drill bit



Measuring out the wood

January is a great month to sow seeds of flowering annuals such as sweet peas and snapdragons as well as vegetables such as tomatoes and chillies, so why not start the seed sowing season with a thrifty and useful seed tray made from a pallet!

How to make

Decide what you'd like the approximate size and shape of your seed tray to be. I chose a rectangle shape with three pieces of wood for the base, which on my pallet were each 8.5cm (just over 3in) wide. I also factored in five 0.5cm gaps between every piece of the base wood and each of the long sides, making the ultimate width of my tray 27.5cm (11in).

If you decide to make a rectangular tray, cut the shorter sides first, followed by the long sides and lastly the pieces of wood for the base.

The length of the two shorter sides was, in the case of my tray, 27.5cm (11in).

Then cut the two longer sides.

When deciding on your overall length, don't forget to measure the thickness of each of your side pieces and include those measurements to your total length. My pallet wood was 2cm (3/4in) thick and I chose an internal length of 36cm (14in) making the overall length for my seed tray 40cm (15.7in).

Next, measure the internal length of the tray and cut each of the base pieces of wood as accurately as possible to that measurement so that they fit snugly inside the base of the tray.

Place the base wood pieces into the base leaving a 0.5cm gap between each of them as well as each of the long sides.

Secure each piece of base wood to either end of the short sides. I used one 30mm screw for each piece of base wood, screwed into the centre of each piece from the outside. I pre-drilled each of the holes beforehand to avoid splitting the wood.

Et voila! You now have a handsome, long-lasting, useful tray made from a sustainable natural material.

Rosie cutting marked wood with hand saw

Rosie's seed tray is secured together

Window Box

What you'll need

To make a window box similar to the one above you'll need the same items as for the seed tray plus:-

- A wood pallet with planks approximately 10cm (4in) wide
- 6 flat strap metal joining plates

Rosie's home-made windowsill box

Window boxes are perfect for planting into at any time of the year, especially now when much-needed colourful cheer can be seen and appreciated from inside the cosy comfort of your home. They're also perfect for people with no outside space.

A great advantage of making your own is that, not only can you customise dimensions to the size of your window ledge, but it should also be cheaper than buying one.

The dimensions of this window box are 75cm (29.5in) wide x 20cm (8in) deep x 20cm (8in) high.

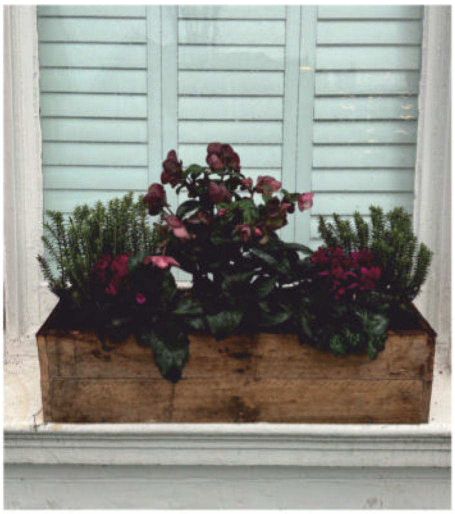
How to make it

Measure the width and depth, (front to back) of your window ledge and decide what height you want the window box to be. This one is 20cm (8in) high.

It's very unlikely that you'll find a pallet with wood planks exactly this size so I found one where the planks were 10cm (4in) wide and cut 4 long lengths and 4 side lengths.

Assemble the first layer of the box in exactly the same way as you would for making a seed tray as per the instructions before.

Above: Rosie screwing the windowsill box plate in place


Above: Rosie's winter box is filled will 1 x Ice N' Roses(R) Early Rose hellebore,, two 'New Zealand Gold' hebes and two x hardy cyclamen

Attach the metal joining plates on the inside of the box; two roughly evenly spaced on the long lengths and one in the centre of each of the side length

Place the finished box on top of the window ledge, fill almost to the top with a suitable peat-free compost and then you're ready to plant it up and gracefully accept compliments from admiring passers by!

Perfect windowsill box plant combinations

Spring
Wallflower
Tulips

Summer
Bacopa (*Chaenostoma cordatum*) with petunia & osteospermum

Autumn
Chrysanthemum
Trailing ivy
Heuchera

More top tips:

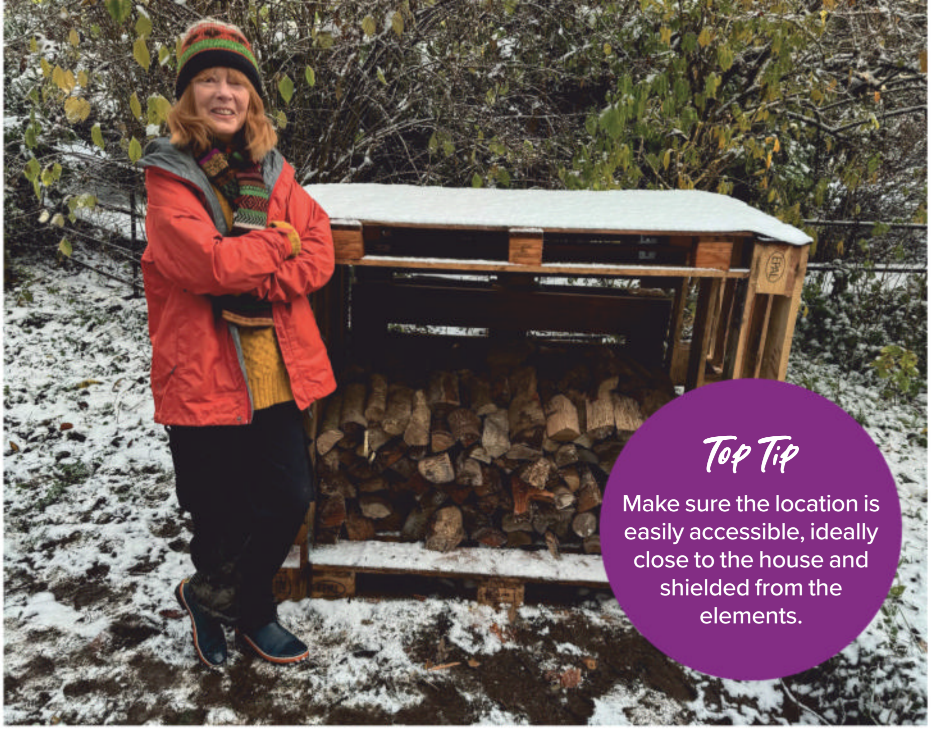
Place the window box on the ledge before filling with compost as it will become very heavy once filled.

Think about the aspect of where the window box is being placed; whether it's sunny or shady, and choose plants accordingly. If you're unsure, download a compass app onto your phone and point it in front of the window box facing into the garden, with the south being sunny, the north shady.

Window boxes will generally need regular watering. You can insert upside down into the soil a small and narrow empty plastic bottle with holes made in the cap and the bottom cut off. Fill with water so that the bottle acts as a slow-release funnel.

Some people line the inside of wood containers to prolong the life of the wood. Empty compost bags turned inside out are a good choice. If you do so, make sure you puncture several drainage holes in the base of the bag before filling the window box with compost.

Below: Choose plants whose height and width match the scale of the box you've made


Rosie's home made pallet log store

Top Tip

Make sure the location is easily accessible, ideally close to the house and shielded from the elements.

Log store

What you'll need

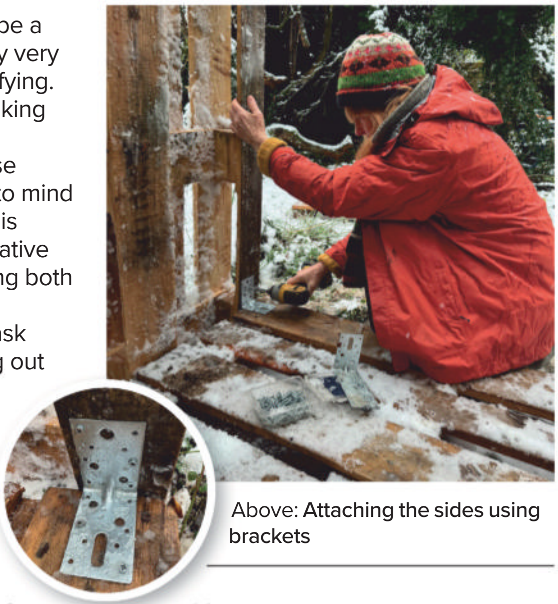
You'll need the same items as per the seed tray make plus:-

- Six identical size wood pallets
- 12 x galvanised angle brackets - 90mm (3.5in) x 90mm (3.5in) x 59mm (2.3in)
- Hammer
- A packet of 25mm tacks
- Roofing felt or any flexible waterproof membrane
- Sharp utility knife

Although this may feel like it might be a complicated DIY project, it's actually very straightforward and extremely satisfying.

I really enjoyed being outside making this, even though it had just been snowing!. Although diet and exercise might be the first things that come to mind at this time of year when wellbeing is mentioned, being involved with creative projects can help as well by boosting both emotional and mental health.

I find the act of focusing on the task becomes totally absorbing, pushing out any stress and worries, and brings a huge amount of joy and pride once finished.


Above: Attaching the sides using brackets

How to make it

Lay down your base pallet, making sure it's level. I placed it lengthwise across.

Screw an angle bracket to each of the four corners with the upright part of the bracket level with the edge of each of the four ends of the pallet.

Place a pallet on one side of, and flush with, the base pallet. Screw the upright part of the bracket to the side pallet, repeating this process on the other side of the base pallet.

Place a pallet at the back horizontally and screw an angle bracket to attach it to each side.

Measure the gap between the top of the back pallet and the top of the side pallets and cut a pallet to size.

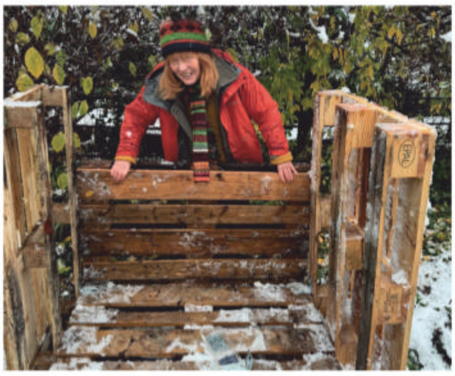
Place it on top of the back pallet and screw an angle bracket to attach it to each side.

The roof

It's a good idea to have a slight slope on the roof for water drainage but it's not essential.

Whichever option you choose you'll need to attach four more angle brackets to support the roof pallet.

Above: Your pallets are ready to work with


Rosie positions the horizontal back panel

Rosie positions the top pallet for the log store

For a sloping roof place the front two brackets higher than the back two, attaching the back brackets first placed at a level so that the back part of the roof is level with the sides at the back. The front two brackets are screwed in higher to create the slope. Finally place the roof pallet onto the brackets.

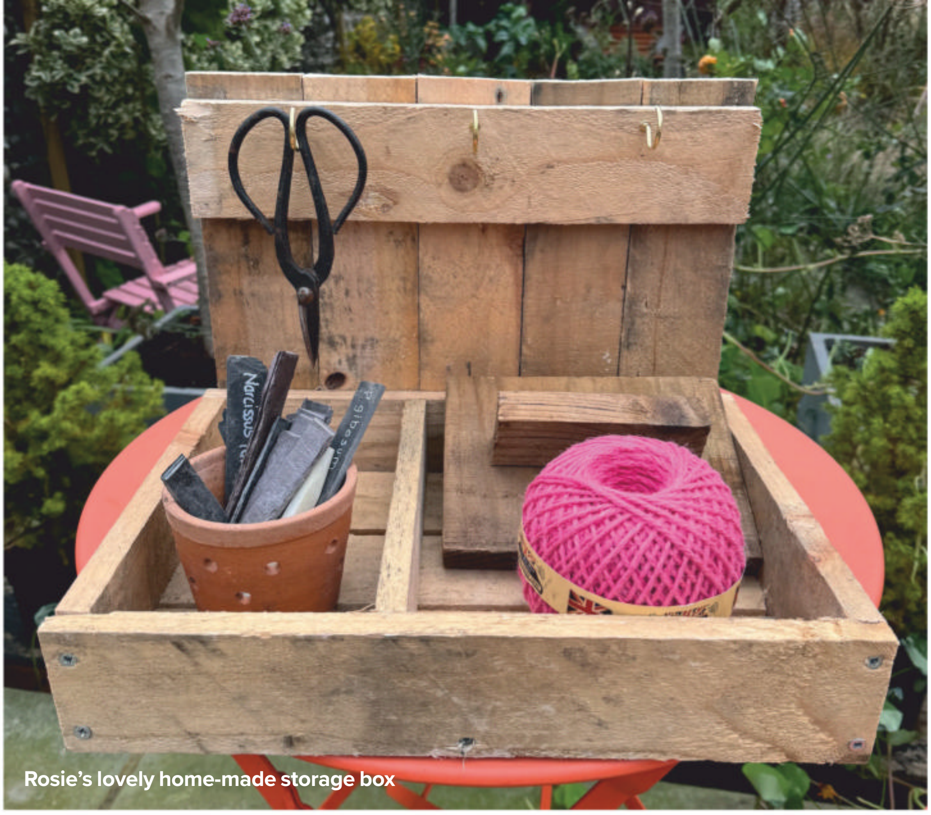
Cover the roof with roofing felt or waterproof membrane making sure there's plenty of overlap. Tack in place, pulling the felt or waterproof membrane tight as you go. Trim off excess and then feel very pleased with yourself as you stand back and admire your handiwork!

Covering the top pallet with roofing felt or a waterproof membrane helps protect the logs

Storage box with an upright back

What you'll need

You'll need the same items as for the seed tray plus some hooks


Rosie's lovely home-made storage box

The basic seed tray can be further adapted to make handy storage boxes.

How to make it

Build your basic seed tray box as per previous instructions.

As my seed tray was rectangular I decided to fix the upright back section onto one of the long length sides rather than the short side, but you can choose either the long or short length.

Measure the length of your chosen side to fix the upright back section to, and cut the appropriate number of planks to fit the space.

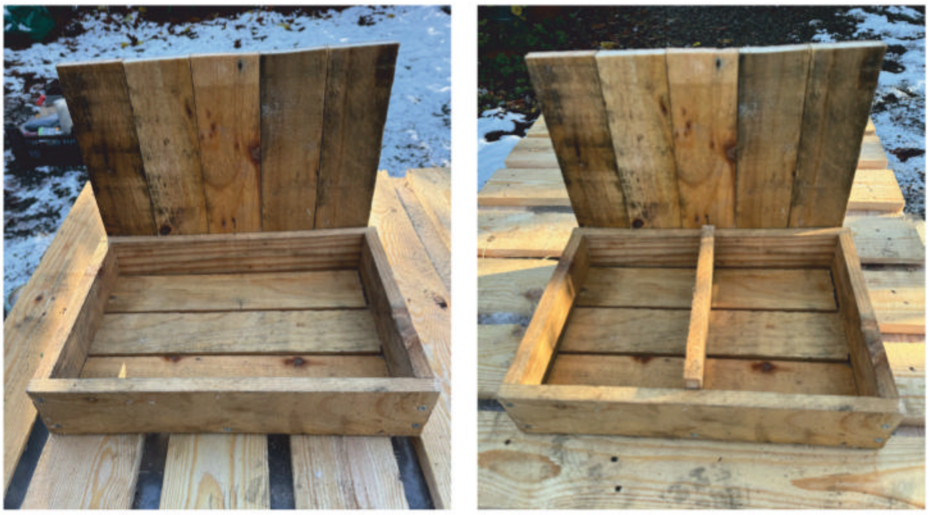
These lengths should be no higher than the longest length of the box, as making the uprights too tall may cause the box to topple over.

Screw each of the uprights to the bottom of the box starting from the middle, using two screws per plank.

Cut another piece of pallet wood the same length as the width of the upright back. Attach it horizontally to the inner side of the upright back, using one screw either end, screwed in from the back of the uprights.

Lastly, screw in your chosen hooks at your chosen height. They should screw in without the need for pre-drilling a hole.

Rosie fixes the upright back section to her storage box


Above: The finished box with (right) an optional divider made from an off-cut of pallet wood

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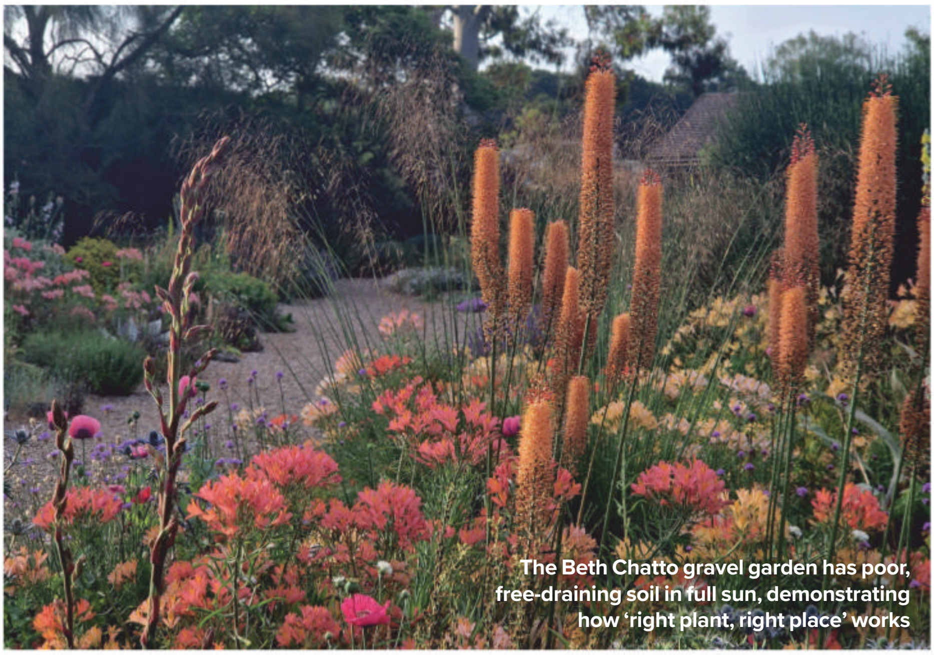
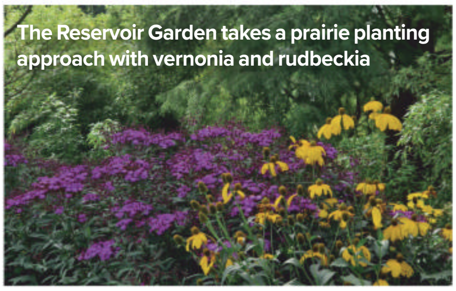
MASTERCLASS

With **Julia Boulton,** Beth Chatto's granddaughter and chief custodian of the world-famous gardens, and her team



The Beth Chatto gravel garden has poor, free-draining soil in full sun, demonstrating how 'right plant, right place' works



The Reservoir Garden takes a prairie planting approach with vernonia and rudbeckia

> 'All soils have their advantages. The art of gardening is to know your soil intimately, to treat it well and select plants which will make any soil seem like an asset, not a problem. You may not be able to grow all the plants you would like to possess, but by choosing plants suited to your conditions, you can carpet the bare earth with contented plants rather than endure the effect of a moth-eaten rug where too many plants have given up the struggle.'
> **-Beth Chatto**

The Water Garden has rich moisture-retentive soil in full sun and part shade

Reflection and planning for the year ahead

Learn from the past to create a happy future garden

A new year signals the time to reflect on the previous 12 months and look forward to what the next year will bring.

January is the month for planning. Much of the natural world is at rest, so take your cue and spend the time instead thinking how to perhaps improve an area of your garden, or research potential new plants and their specific needs.

A lot like people, plants just won't thrive in an environment that's not suited to them. It's an uphill struggle that ultimately encourages unnecessary stress, and who needs more of that?

Right plant, right place

Beth's simple approach of 'right plant, right place' was influenced by husband Andrew's knowledge of plant ecology. He spent a lot of time researching the writings of plant hunters, travellers and scientists in French and German, and he even taught himself Russian in order to read the literature on plant associations of the USSR where many good garden plants come from.

To tackle her rather challenging garden (much of it too dry, too wet or too shady for conventional gardening), Beth relied on Andrew's understanding of plant ecology to help steer her choices to create a sustainable, resilient garden, and to see the potential of 'difficult' areas instead of seeing them as a hindrance.

What Beth learned underpinned her approach to gardening and she shared this simple philosophy with the rest of the world through her books, teachings and gold-winning RHS Chelsea Flower Show gardens; a philosophy which is now instinctively followed by today's gardeners and designers.

Beth and husband Andrew's focus on plant ecology led to the 'right plant, right place' thinking that is widely used today

All images © Beth Chatto Gardens

What plants need

A good place to start is researching where in the world the plants originate. What are the soil conditions there, what's the climate like? Can you offer those conditions? Aspect is equally as important. Full sun or full shade? Part sun or part shade?

Taking the time now to research a plant's needs will pay dividends in the long run. Matching preferred conditions as closely as possible gives plants the best chance to grow to their full potential and withstand attack from pests and diseases.

If you're ever unsure, feel free to send us a question on Instagram bethchattogardens where our team is always happy to help.

Our website is also a great resource to research plants and their growing conditions.

You can find out more about these world-famous gardens at **www.bethchatto.co.uk**

THE SELF-SUFFICIENT (ish) GARDENER

with **Andrew Oldham**

How to create a path from recycled materials

Andrew Oldham explains how to save money and and create a unique garden walkway

Paths are expensive to build. The lion's share of any garden budget often goes into hard landscaping, yet there are thrifty and enjoyable alternatives that can save us buying what we don't necessarily need.

First of all, what about the humble but 'does the job nicely' grass pathway? Grass is often associated with pristine lawns and mowing, rather than as a way to get from A to B. Grass paths are often maligned due to poor drainage, as they can become muddy in winter and brown, compacted dust tracks in summer. Yet, they are porous and have their place, even just to help figure out which areas are most in need of a more permanent and solid solution.

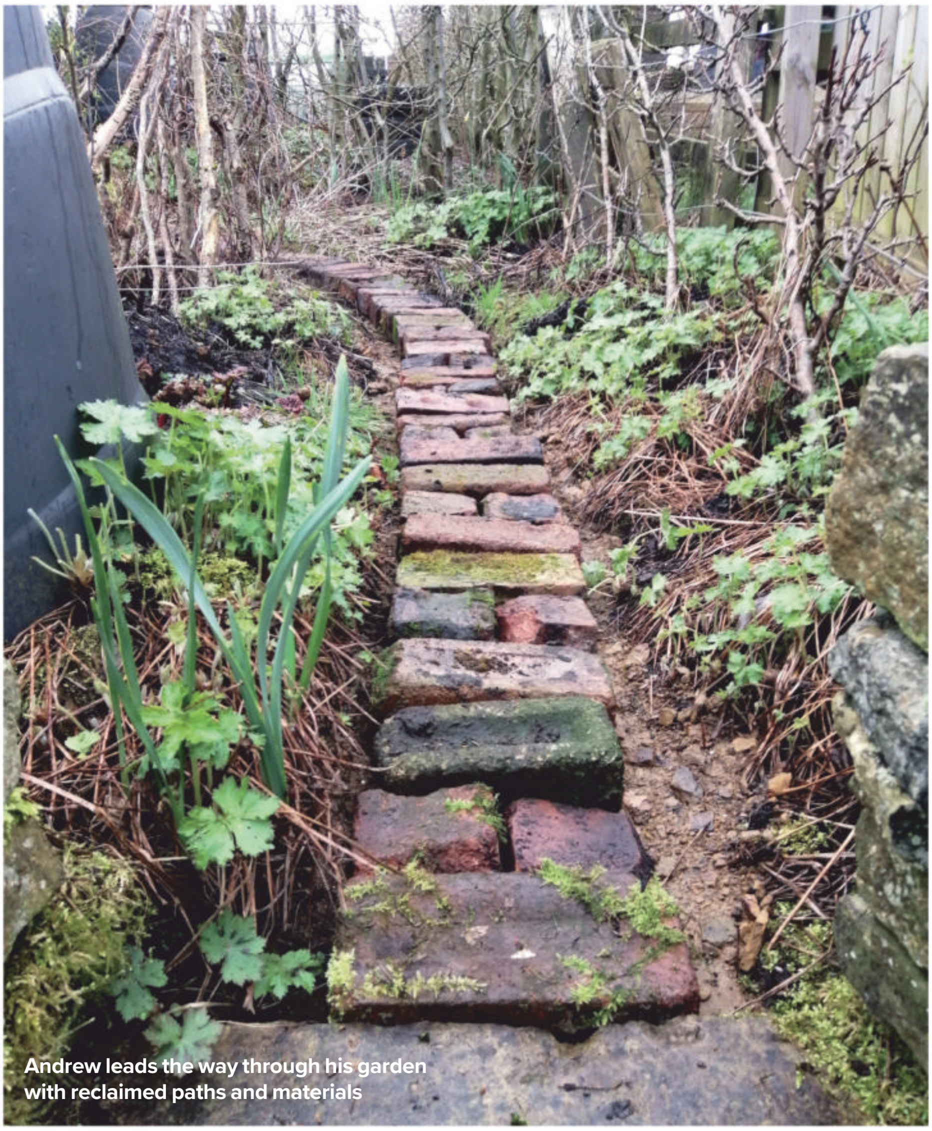
For the first two years of my garden, every path was grass until I worked out where I walked the most, which was from shed to greenhouse, greenhouse to veg patch, after which all paths led to the kettle. Grass, if mowed, is durable, visually appealing and part of any garden's biodiversity.

Some quick-fix paths

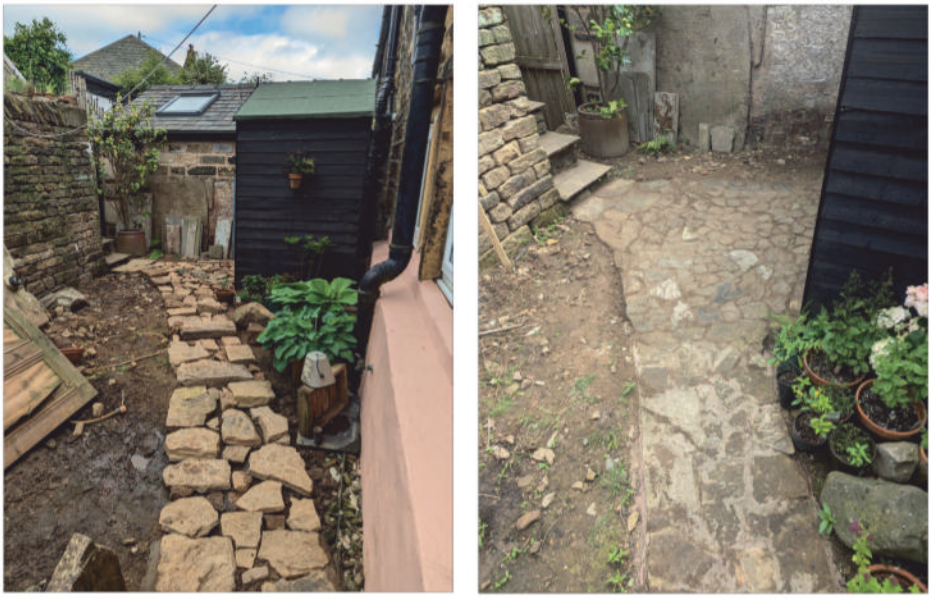
There are alternatives, which I refer to as 'short-lived paths.' Bark chippings spring to mind. Bark can be costly if bought but there are apps like Chip Drop (www.getchipdrop.com) that connect gardeners with free chippings in their area.

Longer-lasting thrifty options

So, how can you have a permanent, long-lasting path that won't break the bank? I have two bountiful resources in my garden: old bricks and stone. I regularly dig up both. I also have loads of sub soil dug out when a retaining wall was constructed to stop the garden collapsing into the house. For

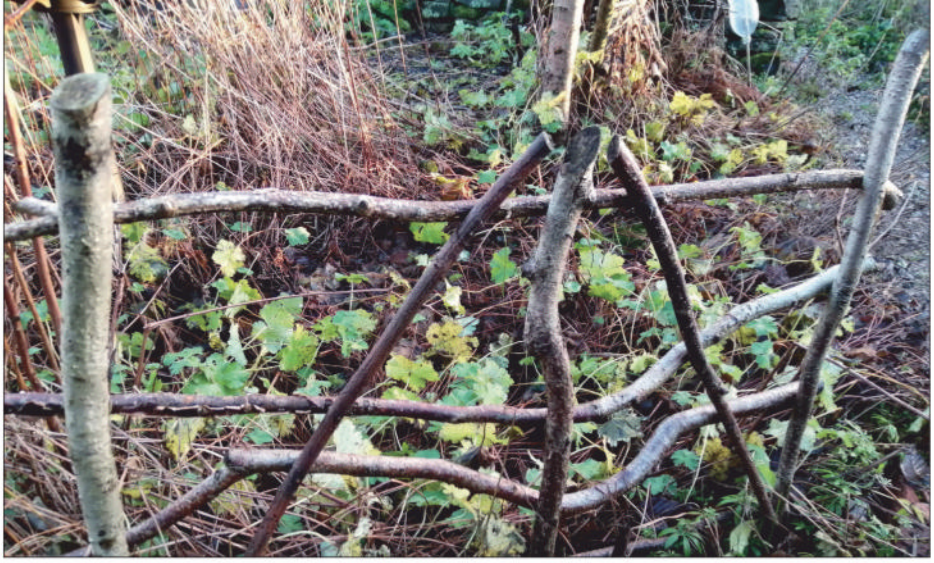


Andrew leads the way through his garden with reclaimed paths and materials



Crazy paving when it was newly laid and once it had been filled and levelled with a cement sand mix

All images unless otherwise credited: Andrew Oldham



The final hurdle in place

two years this sub soil has been used as beaten tracks in the garden, allowing water to disperse, but the downside of it was that weeds got a foothold.

So, in came red bricks, laid down over those beaten paths to create access to our cordon apples and pears. The bricks are set loose, in a pattern, and I may at some point concrete them in or simply brush sharp sand between them.

The stone was another matter and for that I channelled my 1970s childhood and brought back crazy paving. Like the bricks, I laid the stone out loose, placing the larger pieces on the edge of the path and filling in between them like a jigsaw. Next, it was simply a matter of placing them and making sure they were level. I brushed in a dry mix of cement and sand (one part cement to three parts sand), left it for several days, covered it if frost was on the cards, and a week later I had a path that snaked from the kitchen door to the garden steps.

The great thing about using recycled materials is that they dictate how they will be used, from the size to the shape of a path, be it bark, paving stones, bricks or stone. The last thing that recycled materials bring to the garden is green credentials and although I use cement, it is nothing compared to the cost and use of resources to buy new. My stone path cost me two bags of cement and three of sand, and that's it. The rest was merely thinking outside the box, which is a concept we all could and should embrace as saving money feels so good.

Step by step project

Making hurdles from hedge cuttings

This project allows you to reuse cuttings from your hedge that are thick enough to create supports.

You will need:

Cuttings from a hedge, thicker than your thumb, cut with secateurs to 60cm (24in) long, to give you 9 wood pieces
Panel Pins
Hammer
Secateurs

Step 1: Place four pieces of wood on the ground around 10cm (4in) apart to act as the horizontals ('bars').

Step 2: Place three pieces of wood on top of these, vertically ('legs'). One on either end, and one in the middle.

Step 3: Using the hammer, nail them together. Do not worry if the nails go all the way through – see Step 5.

Step 4: Take the remaining two pieces of wood and place at a 45-degree angle so that they run down from the middle 'leg' to the left and right. Nail together.

Step 5: Flip the whole thing over and use the hammer to bend back any nails poking through so that they sit flush to the hurdle.

Step 6: Using the secateurs, cut the 'legs' at each end to a 45-degree angle to help push into the ground. Cut the middle leg just below the bottom bar.

Andrew's Self-sufficiency (ish) Jobs for the fortnight

1 Cleaning and oiling tools will save money and make them last longer. Using a stiff brush and wire wool, clean tools. Remove all dirt, then oil blades and wooden handles.

2 Making sure hard surfaces are not slippy, so we last longer Throw sharp sand on any hard surface and use a stiff brush to work it in. The action of scrubbing the surface removes moss and algae, and reduces the chance of slipping.

3 Tree planting Soak bare rooted plants in a bucket for 30 minutes. Dig a hole wider and deeper than the root ball and add well-rotted manure with a sprinkling of mycorrhiza. Place the tree in the hole and backfill, gently firming down with your heel, then water well. Plant the tree slightly proud of the surrounding soil on a gentle mound to prevent waterlogging.

4 Soft fruit planting Currants should be planted the same way as trees, 1-1.2m (3-4ft) between plants, then pruned back hard. Strawberries are planted 30-45cm (12-18in) apart, or planted in pots in the greenhouse for an early crop. Raspberries should be planted on wires between two posts at 45cm (18in) intervals.

About **Andrew Oldham**

■ Andrew Oldham is a self-sufficient(ish) gardener who believes in the joy of down-to-earth growing and cooking. He lives high on the Saddleworth hills with his family at Pig Row. Find him on all social media platforms as **@lifeonpigrow**

Your GARDENING TEA BREAK

Gardening's king of trivia and brain-teasers, **Graham Clarke**

New Year freeze

It's such a shame that a new year begins just at the time when you don't want to venture outside. The impetus of a 'fresh start' is diminished by the fact that it's too cold to get out there and do very much. But our plants don't have a choice – they have to be outside! One question often asked is: does freezing kill a plant's roots?

Well, tender plants, such as dahlias and tomatoes, are usually killed outright if they freeze. However, hardy plants will usually survive.

When winter comes, the above-ground parts of hardy perennials, trees and shrubs go into a slumber (or 'dormancy'): the plants die back to ground level, or their leaves drop. These above-ground parts are no longer susceptible to damage by freezing.

However, roots *can* freeze, and even be killed – which is why we recommend lagging patio pots in winter with bubble-wrap, and why plants can drown in saturated winter soil.

Slow thaw for broccoli

It's better for plants to thaw slowly if they've been frozen or frosted. A quick thaw can make flowers turn brown (think of camellias).

Even vegetables, like broccoli, can go off. Old gardeners would take a spade and remove a little soil from the north side of the plants. Then, on the south side, they'd insert a spade gently and lever the plant over, inclining their heads towards the ground, and facing northwards – this prevented the sun from shining directly on them.

- I wonder, did the late actor John Thaw ever meet former newsreader Jon Snow – and did they get on?

Wow! I didn't know that...

- Plants with *hiemale* or *hyemalis* as part of their Latin name invariably means that they are winter-flowering: eg. *Leucojum hiemale* (winter snowflake) and *Eranthis hyemalis* (winter aconite).
- In the UK, soil can sometimes freeze solid down to 30cm (12in). However, in parts of Russia, Canada or even the American mid-west, the freeze can reach down to 1.2m (4ft).

This fortnight in gardening history 7 - 20 January

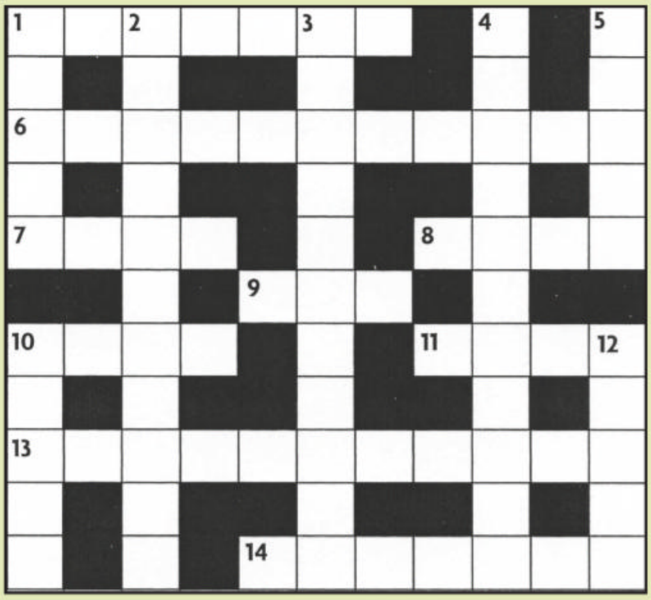
12 January, 1699 James Sutherland was appointed the first 'King's Botanist', under a Warrant of William III. Sutherland was instrumental in creating the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, and his ground-breaking (for the time) publication *Hortus Medicus Edinburgensis,* placed Scotland at the forefront of European botany.

17 January 1988 The largest cactus (*Cereus giganteus* or *Carnegia gigantea*) rising to a height of 17.67m, was discovered in the Maricopa Mountains, near Gila Bend, Arizona.

18 January 1933 Prof David Bellamy, botanist, author and environmental campaigner, was born.

19 January 1970 The first Gro-Bag was launched for the professional grower. It was made by Fisons (based at the village of Levington in Suffolk), and was followed by the launch of a similar product for amateur gardeners three years later. Today, some 12 million growing bags are manufactured every year, with the Levington Original remaining a leading brand.

Crossword... just for fun!



ACROSS

1 A Floral one is a feature at many national and county flower shows (7)

6 In May every year, the RHS ________ Flower _____ is held in London (7,4)

7 _____ *majus* – the bullwort, an annual with white flowers in summer (4)

8 This head of state in some Islamic countries is also a variety of cold-tolerant cantaloupe melon (4)

9 This girl, this month! (3)

10 The mystery over the allotment site thickens, it is said (4)

11 The beetroot genus (4)

13 Lilac tent is something that will sparkle! (11) (anag)

14 Types of fungi having umbrella-like caps, with numerous gills beneath (7)

DOWN

1 Coffee and chocolate mixed flavour, as in *Heuchera* '______' and *Iris* 'Honey ______ Lotta' (5)

2 Botanical name for the Sikkim rhubarb (5,6)

3 *Lathyrus latifolius* is often referred to as the ____________ sweet pea (or pea) (11)

4 Loam? Mead? Him was a boxer! (8,3) (anag)

5 Shady, leafy shelter or recess in a garden or woods (5)

10 The garden pea genus (5)

12 *Dryas octopetala* is known as the mountain ______ (5)

ANSWERS TO CROSSWORD ABOVE

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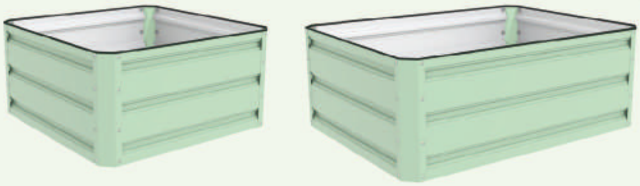

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TOP HANDY HACKS

With **Adam Kirtland**

Three great ideas for used coffee grounds

Adam reveals how your daily brew can feed plants and help deter pests

By-products - things that are produced as a result of making something else - can often be put to good use in the garden. Coffee grounds are a great example, as cafes and coffee shops all over the UK grind tonnes of coffee beans every day, but don't usually have a use for them after brewing up.

However, in recent years, some coffee outlets have started bagging up their used grounds and leaving them on the counter so customers can take them away, free of charge, to use as they wish. I've been using coffee grounds in my garden for the past few years and I'm delighted to share some of the helpful ways that you can try them too.

Bagged coffee grounds won't store well for long periods of time, so use them straight away or certainly within a week of getting them home.

Add them to your compost bin

Coffee grounds are a perfect material to add to your compost heap, but do make sure you do so in moderation. Good composting is all about using a mixture of green and brown materials to give the heap the best chance of doing well.

Spread the grounds thinly and mix them in so they don't get compacted and start to smell bad.

Additionally, coffee grounds can reputedly attract beneficial microorganisms and worms, which enhance the quality of the compost.

Above: Adam gets excited about the uses for used coffee grounds Inset: Coffee is useful as part of the balanced mix of compost ingredients

Avoid adding too many at once, as excessive nitrogen can upset the balance of the compost. If you make your own filter coffee and have biodegradable filters, then you can safely add these to your composting system too.

Use them as a mulch for beds and pots

A thin layer of used coffee grounds make an effective, eco-friendly mulch for the garden, breaking down slowly, adding organic matter and nutrients like nitrogen to the soil.

However, they can form a crust when applied thickly, limiting water and air flow, so mix them with other organic mulches like shredded leaves or straw. Avoid placing them directly against plant stems to prevent rot too and do give them a little mix in too to help kick start the process.

A handy eco-friendly mulch

Some people believe that used grounds may slightly acidify the soil, which will benefit acid-loving plants like azaleas or blueberries.

What have you found?

Do write or email in we'd love to know!

Make your own liquid coffee fertiliser

To make fertiliser, steep a cup of used grounds in warm water for 24-48 hours, creating a mild 'coffee tea'. This solution provides plants with trace minerals like magnesium, potassium and nitrogen, promoting healthy growth.

Strain the mixture before use to prevent clogging spray bottles or watering cans and then apply it to the base of plants as a soil drench. This method is particularly useful for container gardens or during periods of rapid plant growth. Again this is thought to work well with acid loving plants.

Right: Used coffee grounds can be transformed into a nutrient-rich liquid plant fertiliser

For more gardening advice, tips, and DIY projects, you can follow Adam on Instagram **@viewfromthepottingbench**

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In the blue!

Liz Zorab offers some upbeat sky-coloured beauties to distract from seasonal blues

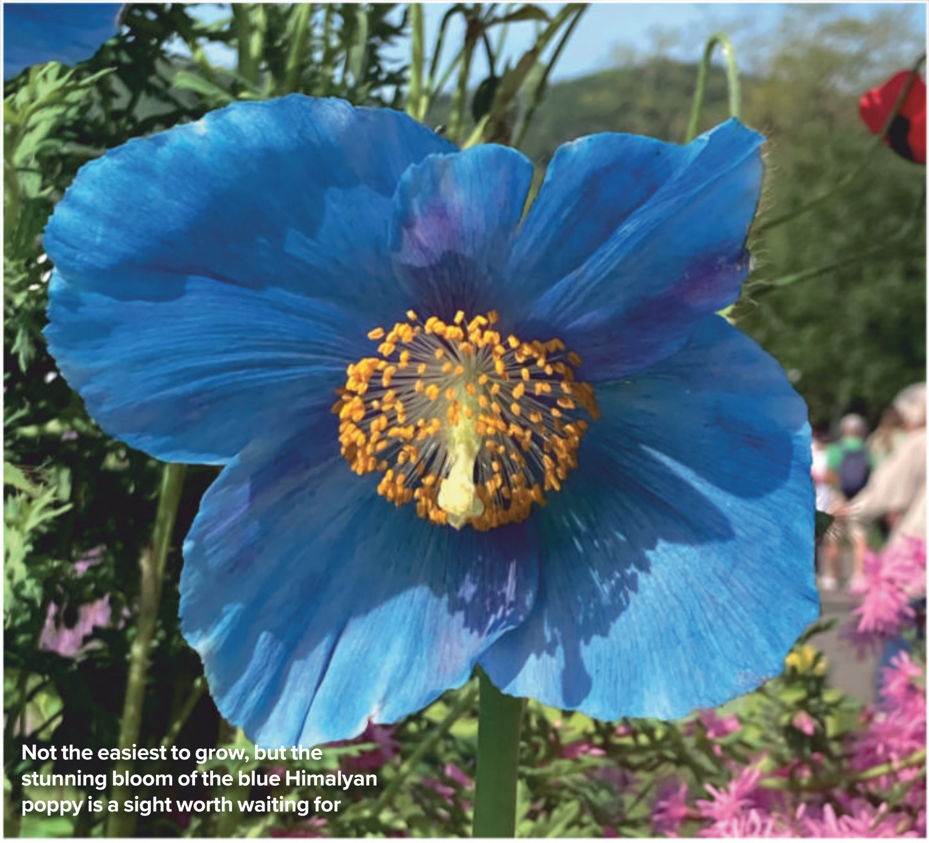
With the midwinter and New Year celebrations behind us, it is easy to fall into feeling the winter gloom, so I thought now would be the perfect time to get excited about some of the best true blue flowers available for us to grow in the year ahead.

Scilla luciliae

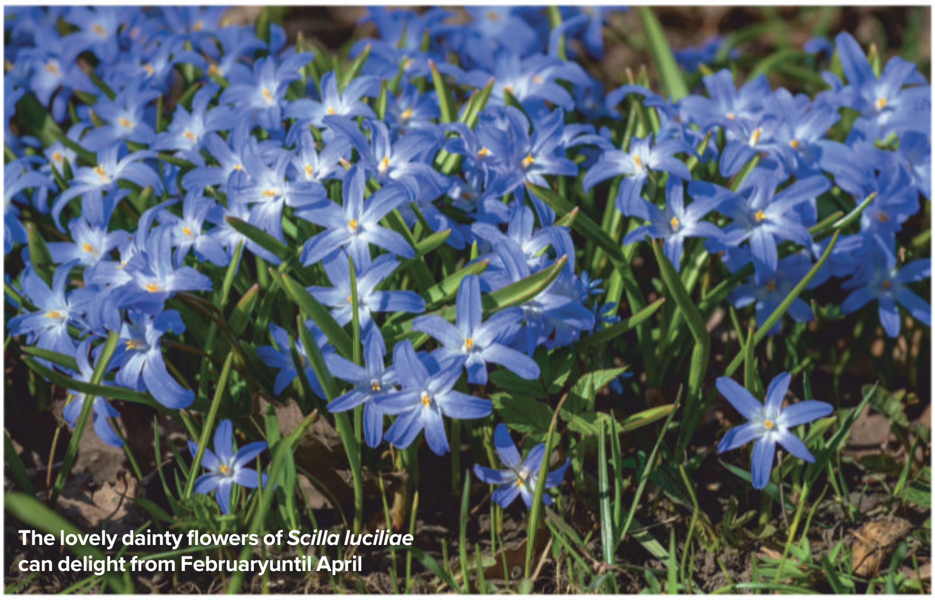
Glory of the snow, also known as *Chionodoxa luciliae*, grows from a small bulb to 15cm (6in) in height. Individually they are pretty flowers, but plant in groups or drifts to get the best visual effect. They like fertile and well-drained soil, making rockeries or pots ideal.

They flower between February and April and require direct sun or partial sun to produce the best flower display. As with all bulbs, allow the foliage to die back naturally.

Scilla luciliae will naturalise, forming a spreading display year after year.



Not the easiest to grow, but the stunning bloom of the blue Himalayan poppy is a sight worth waiting for



The lovely dainty flowers of *Scilla luciliae* can delight from Februaryuntil April

© Shutterstock

Meconopsis betonicifola

As a young gardener I tried several times to grow this blue Himalayan poppy without success. If you can provide soil that is neutral to slightly acid and moist but well-drained, and situated in an east or west-facing spot in partial shade, sheltered from cold winds, then you may find that they grow well in your garden.

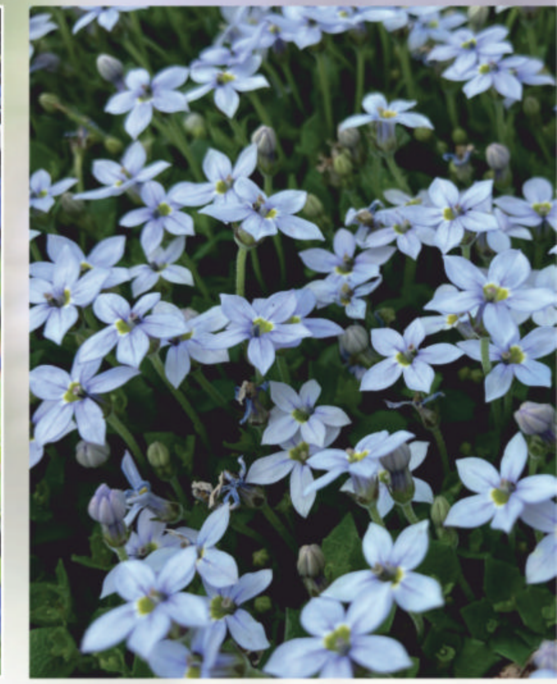
They tend to be short-lived perennials, often dying after they have flowered in June and July. Height 120cm (4ft) and spread 50cm (20in).

All images unless otherwise credited: Liz Zorab

The vibrant blue of *Salvia* 'Black and Blue'

© Shutterstock

A carpet of blue with *Lobelia pedunculata*



Salvias

Salvias have become increasingly popular over the past few years and rightly so!

There are several blue-flowering varieties including 'Blue Butterflies', 'Black and Blue' and *Salvia bullulata*, which is the bluest of the blue salvias that I have growing in my garden. They vary in height from 50cm (20in) to 150cm (5ft) and spread up to 1m (3.2ft).

Flowering time varies according to variety. Many are not very hardy, so should be taken under cover before the first frost.

Lobelia pedunculata

I spotted this beautiful blue flower at Kew Gardens, where it had formed a large carpet of colour across the ground. Also known as *Pratia pedunculata*, it grows to 2-4cm (1-2in) tall and 1.5m (5ft) spread.

It forms an evergreen mat of small leaves above which the small blue flowers appear in summer. It is hardy throughout most of the UK and prefers a sheltered site in shade or partial shade - although the plants I saw at Kew had little shade and were thriving.

Echinops bannaticus

Although the colour of these flowers edges towards purple, they make it on to my blues list for the interest in shape and form they offer.

The globes of flowers are held above the thistle-like foliage and attract bees and other pollinating insects to feed on them. The clump of echinops in my garden provides an audible reminder of this plant's value to wildlife each time I walk past.

Height 1-1.5m (3-5ft) and spread up to 1m (3ft).

I find it easiest to propagate by dividing clumps in spring or autumn.

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ABOVE: Biodiversity-boosting blue globe flowers of *Echinops bannaticus*

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Great for partial shade and very pretty *Corydalis flexuosa* 'Craigton Blue'

An evergreen shrub with sky-blue flowers *Plumbago auriculata*

Impressive, attention-drawing blooms of *Glandora prostrata* 'Heavenly Blue'

Glandora prostrata 'Heavenly Blue'

Every time I see the intensity of the blue of these flowers, I am impressed. A low-growing, evergreen shrub that is ideal as ground cover in a sunny spot.

It prefers well-drained, neutral or acid soil in a south- or west-facing position. If your soil does not drain well, try growing in a raised bed or large container. It reaches 50cm (20in) height and spread. This plant is sometimes known as *Lithodora diffusa* 'Heavenly Blue'.

Corydalis flexuosa 'Craigton Blue'

I spotted this plant at Llysdinam Gardens in Powys on the edge of their woodland garden.

A great plant for partial shade, the leaves and flowers grow on red stems up to 40cm (16in) height and spread during spring and early summer, after which the plant dies back until the following year.

It grows on most soil types in most situations, except a south-facing spot, preferring moist, but well-drained soil. Also known as *Corydalis flexuosa* 'Craighton Blue'.

Amsonia tabernaemontana

Here's a good blue-flowered plant for all but north-facing gardens. It even has some drought tolerance for drier areas of the country. It's relatively unfussy about soil type, will tolerate partial shade, but thrives in full sun. The clusters of small grey-blue flowers appear from May to July.

Height 60cm (2ft) and 40cm (16in) spread.

ABOVE: *Amsonia tabernaemontana* is an unfussy plant which flowers May to July

Plumbago auriculata

If you have a frost-free area greenhouse or unheated conservatory, this evergreen shrub may be the one for you. Provide it with some support and it can grow to 4m (13ft) or more in height, 1.5m (5ft) spread.

The sky-blue flowers appear during summer and autumn and it is happy in all but a north-facing site and requires well-draining soil in full sun to thrive.

I saw this one on a visit to Aberglasney Gardens, where they have it growing in a large container against a south-facing wall.

Add an edible

Linums

Cooked flax seeds are edible and have a nutty flavour. Perennial flax, *Linum perenne*, is a semi-evergreen plant that carries pale blue flowers during the summer months. It prefers well-drained soil and a south-facing position and will fail to thrive on heavy and clay soils. The annual flax, *Linum usitatissimum*, produces an equally blue flower.

Sow seeds in spring for flowers from June to September. Height up to 1m (3.5ft).

I once saw an entire field of blue flax undulating in the breeze, it looked like a shimmering sea-scape.

GROWING FROM SEED

with **Ruth Hayes**, AG's gardening expert

This traditional star never falls from favour

Choose dianthus for easy-going colour and scent

Perennial carnations, or *Dianthus caryophyllus*, are one of my favourite garden plants because they give so much and as very little in return.

I went through a phase of regarding them as rather fuddy-duddy and old maidish but actually, I think they are a fantastic way of bringing reliable scent and colour to borders and containers.

I love their warm, delicious clove-laden fragrance and the way their blooms provide an excellent contrast to the narrow, spiky leaves.

Perennial dianthus come in a wide range of colours but my favourite are those that flower in shades of pink, from the palest baby hue to the dramatically deep tones of 'Magenta Fizz'.

With regular deadheading, they will bring colour to the garden from late spring right through into the winter.

Carnations are easy to grow and maintain. They like a sunny spot with free-draining soil and are ideal plants for the front of borders, containers and rock gardens.

They are not the longest-lived plants and their crowns can become woody with age, but dianthus are easy to propagate either via cuttings or by layering.

Above: Dark pink carnations make a striking edging to borders

They are also easy to grow from seed. Sow undercover in trays of seed compost, and carefully transplant the seedlings into small individual pots of peat-free multipurpose compost when they are large enough to handle without damaging them.

Then add them to the garden in summer when they have been acclimatised to live outside.

TOP TIP Dianthus are called 'pinks' because of the serrated edges of their petals, which looks like they've been trimmed with pinking shears

Drink in this elegant summer beauty

- In the depths of winter, few things cheer me more than starting seeds for the coming summer and one of my must-sows every year is cosmos seeds.
- These elegant half hardy annuals with their frondy foliage and joyously open flowers are easy-going border fillers that last well into the autumn.
- They usually come in shades of pink, or eye-scorching citrus tones, but there are some varieties that have a beautiful subtlety that are worth searching for.
- One such is 'Apricot Lemonade', which has delicate pale lemony petals that form an eye-catching pink centre in the middle of each flower.
- Sow the large seeds undercover in late winter, grow the young plants individually in small pots before planting out in summer when the frosts have finished.
- I pinch out the growing tips to encourage bushy growth and more flowers, and don't forget to deadhead regularly through the summer to keep them going for as long as possible.

'Apricot Lemonade' cosmos have a delicate beauty

What's On

11 Jan: Beetham Nurseries Orchid Show, Beetham Nurseries, Pool Darkin Lane, Beetham, near Milnthorpe, Cumbria, LA7 7AP. 9am-4pm.
11 Jan: Hardy Plant Society Meeting: Succession Planting for a Long Season: a talk by Fergus Garrett & Plant Sale, The Old Barn Hall, 55 Church Road, Great Bookham, Leatherhead, Surrey, KT23 3PQ. Doors open 10am.
11 Jan: Make a leather plant hanger, RHS Garden Bridgewater, Occupation Road, Worsley, Manchester M28 2LJ.
13 Jan: Well walk, RHS Garden Rosemoor: Rosemoor, Great Torrington, Devon EX38 8PH.
13 Jan: Winter willow walk, RHS Garden Hyde Hall, Creephedge Lane, Rettendon, Chelmsford CM3 8ET.
17 Jan: Snowdrop Festival at the Garden House, The Garden House, Buckland Monachorum, Yelverton, Devon, PL20 7LQ. 10.30am-3.30pm.
18 Jan: Harveys Garden Plants' Celebration of Snowdrops, New Green Centre, New Green Avenue, Thurston, Bury St Edmunds, IP31 3TG. 11.30am-2pm.
19 Jan: Rusland Potato Day, Rusland Valley Horticultural Society, Greenodd Village Hall, near Ulverston, the Lake District, LA12 7RD. 10am-2pm.
22 Jan: Hyde Hall through the years, RHS Garden Hyde Hall, Creephedge Lane, Rettendon, Chelmsford CM3 8ET.
23 Jan: Rose pruning, RHS Garden Rosemoor: Rosemoor, Great Torrington, Devon EX38 8PH.
24 Jan: Snowdrop Festival at the Garden House, The Garden House, Buckland Monachorum, Yelverton, Devon, PL20 7LQ. 10.30am-3.30pm.
24 Jan: Low-cost gardening for absolute beginners, RHS Garden Bridgewater, Occupation Road, Worsley, Manchester M28 2LJ.

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2 Enjoy perennial blooms for longer, Ruth Hayes shows you how

3 Why not grow... mountain sorrel, a lovely, lemony edible

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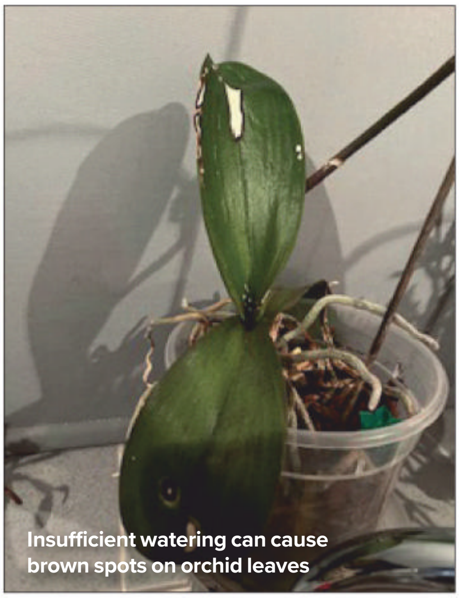
Ask JOHN NEGUS

John is a gardening legend and here to answer your lovely questions

Why is my orchid leaf becoming scarred?

Q One of my orchids has developed these unsightly scars. It has stopped producing a good spear of blooms. I don't recall doing anything that might cause it.
Jackie Fox, Ripon


Insufficient watering can cause brown spots on orchid leaves

A Thank you for the attached image of your unhappy moth orchid (phalaenopsis). A common cause of brown spots and splitting leaves is inadequate watering – roots are too dry. The best time to water is in the morning.

Initially, hold your plant to see if it feels light. If you suspect that it's too dry, sit it in a bowl filled with about 2cm (1in) of water. If it's thirsty, it will absorb the liquid. It's vital to keep roots damp but not waterlogged.

As all orchids prefer reasonably good light, but not direct sunlight, another cause of leaf cracking is excessive warmth from being placed on a too sunny a windowsill, or central heating. Ideally, simulate jungle humidity by misting your plant several times a week with tepid water.

Remember, low temperatures – less than 13C (55F) can inhibit flowering.

As it appears to be suffering from a cultural, rather than a pest or disease, problem, encourage it to prosper by spraying it a specific orchid feed, or strengthen it with SB Plant Invigorator, which speeds growth, controls pests and can be applied throughout the year.

What's wrong with my witch hazel?

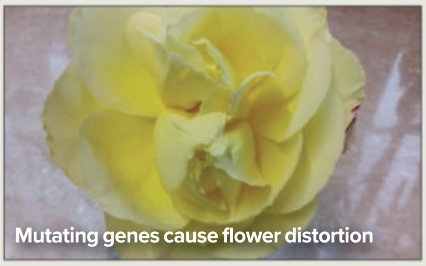
Q A problem I have is with a witch hazel that is several years old, but the leaves do not drop in winter to reveal the yellow catkins. Please can you advise what I can do to remedy this.
Christine Semmens (via email)

A That's unusual. Being deciduous – leaf-shedding in winter – witch hazel, botanically hamamelis, normally discards its foliage in late autumn or winter when nights are frosty. One is then treated to a wealth of spidery, spun-gold, petals.

As, however, your shrub or tree has catkins, it's a hazel (*Corylus avellana*) and it has yet to lose its leaves because you have a very sheltered garden perhaps.

Above: Hazel trees, rather than witch hazel, bear catkins in winter and early spring

Quick questions & answers


Mutating genes cause flower distortion

An unusual rosebud

Q I thought your readers would be interested in this unusual rose I unwittingly saved when cutting back our old Whisky Mac rose bush. It looked like a normal closed bud, but opened with two rosebud centres surrounded by shared petals. It's fascinating and so rewarding to witness what nature can achieve.
Stephen Ward, Choppington, Northumberland

A Thank you so much for showing us this lovely bloom of your Whisky Mac ('Tanky') rose with two rosebud centres.

Like you, we are fascinated by the beautiful deviation that can result from mutating genes. It's good that you are growing this uniquely coloured variety.

Vigorous and bushy, its medium-sized and intensely fragrant flowers always command a double take. We, too, are in awe of how Nature can amaze and appeal to us.

Fungal spots on a sedum

Q A young sedum plant with healthy green leaves has developed pale brown spots. No other plants in the vicinity have been affected. What is the problem?
Janet Savage (via email)

A A fungus is responsible, but luckily it's nothing to worry about at this time of year when the foliage has died back for winter.

Collect up and dispose of affected leaves and fresh healthy growth will return later this year.

Right: Fresh foliage will emerge in spring

Ask JOHN NEGUS

John is a gardening legend and here to answer your lovely questions

The best way to treat an amaryllis

Q My amaryllis started flowering last September, which caught me unawares. It then flowered again in December and is still going.Is this usual and how should I care for it after flowering?
Peter Davidson, Bristol

A What a wonderful amaryllis (hippeastrum)! To have flowered in September, then again at Christmas and yet again now, is extraordinary. What a treat for all who see it - you must be thrilled to bits.

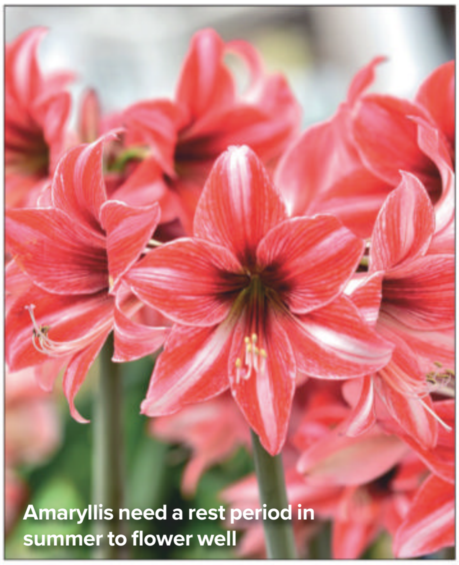
For the moment, liquid-feed it weekly with a high-potash tomato fertiliser. Water regularly, too, to keep foliage perky.

When it starts to wither, leave the foliage but cut back the flower stem to the base. Continue feeding with a general purpose fertiliser and in summer, move the plant to a shady spot in the greenhouse.

In late autumn, cease feeding and watering so that leaves shrivel and die back and encourage the bulb to become dormant.

In mid-December or January, tap the bulb from its pot, removing dead leaves and loose scales, and reset it in a larger pot, in dampened potting compost. Don't water again until new leaves appear and roots are developing.

There should be a 2in (5cm) gap between pot and bulb.



Amaryllis need a rest period in summer to flower well

Caring for clematis cuttings

Q I took clematis cuttings last summer but am unsure how to overwinter them.
Tracy Baynton (via email)

A I suggest that you overwinter the rooted clematis cuttings in your greenhouse, keeping the compost damp but not soggy.

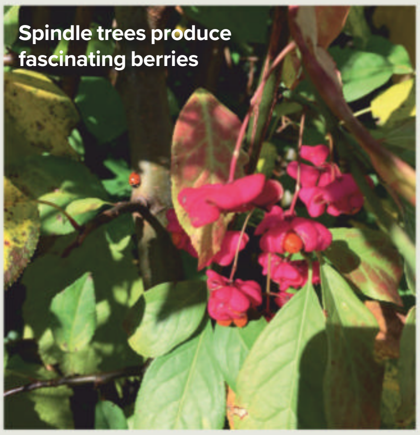
Ideally, sit pots on a bed of gravel to ensure good drainage.

Then, when nights are warmer in spring and frosts have finished, plant your charges where you wish them to flower, positioning them so that roots and lower stems are lightly shaded, but upper regions, where flowers form, are in full sun.

Encourage your plants to flourish and bloom well by working a liberal quantity of composted manure into the planting site. Feed them with sulphate of potash next year. Start in April and continue, monthly, until September.

Above: **Clematis cuttings like damp but not soggy compost**

Quick questions & answers



Spindle trees produce fascinating berries

Can you identify this?

Q Could you possibly identify the attached shrub, please?
David Honeyman (via email)

A The shrub in question is spindle tree (*Euonymus europaeus*). A British native preferring chalky soil, its small and insignificant greenish flowers are followed by flamboyant pink capsules enclosing orange seeds.

Fascinating when seen in the countryside and a joy to have in one's garden, it makes a small, freely branching tree.

Why won't my phlomis flower?

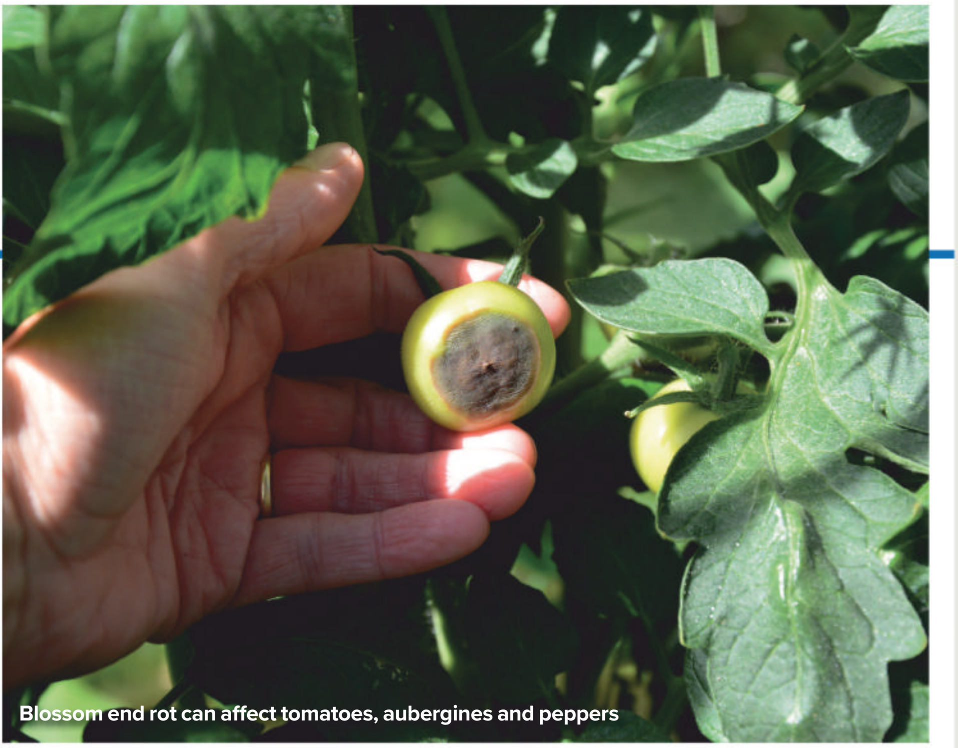
Q How can I encourage my phlomis to flower? I failed miserably last year.
Mike Sheldon (via email)

A I am sorry that your *Phlomis russeliana* hasn't flowered. It is normal for some plants to take a year or so to establish before blooming.

Pleasingly, it is a free-flowering species and should perform for you next year.

A good way to encourage it to bloom is to feed it with sulphate of potash. Sprinkle it over the root area, monthly, from April to September and water it in. Repeat annually until it settles down to enchanting you every summer.

Left: A feed of potassium should boost flowering


Blossom end rot can affect tomatoes, aubergines and peppers

How can I beat blossom end rot this year?

Q I had a problem with my tomatoes last year that I'd like to avoid in future. They developed hard flat bases and rotted early. What am I doing wrong?
Bob Marshall, Birmingham

A Bad luck! I suspect that your black-spotted tomatoes are suffering from blossom-end rot, a physiological disorder caused by erratic watering and calcium deficiency.

Calcium is an important nutrient that plants take up from damp soil or compost and blossom end rot is most commonly found in plants grown in containers and growbags.

When their growing medium dries out, or plants are watered erratically, the calcium remains in the soil and the plant suffers.

It can also be caused by fertiliser being applied to dry soil or compost.

Once blossom end rot has appeared in a fruit, it can't be reversed, but when fruits ripen you can cut off the flat ends and use the rest of the fruit in cooking, to save waste.

The way to combat it is to water and feed consistently, making sure the compost stays damp, but not sodden.

During very dry spells, you may need to water twice a day. Blossom end rot also affects peppers and aubergines, creating the same symptoms.

How do I care for my bromeliad?

Q I was given this bromeliad for Christmas and am panicking - how do I look after it? Can I replant its offsprings and what is the best compost?
Michael Carver (via email)

A Bromeliads are wonderful plants and yours is a *Guzmania lingulate* var. *minor* commonly called scarlet star.

It is best overwintered in a heated greenhouse, or indoors in a warm spot in light shade. Keep the compost damp but not soggy. In nature it's an epiphyte, its roots gripping tightly to tree trunks.

By all means propagate it from offsets – shoots that form around the base of the plant. Ideally, use a sharp knife to detach them with, if possible, roots.

Then insert them into a house plant potting mix augmented with a half part, by volume, of coarse grit. Cover offsets with a clear plastic bag to retain moisture.

Left: Bromeliads thrive in a warm spot

Quick questions & answers

Feeding and watering will help *aloe veras* to thrive

Looking after *Aloe vera*

Q I am never sure how much water to give my *Aloe vera* plant. I usually let its compost dry out in between waterings so the stem doesn't rot, but its leaves are looking droopy. Should I water it more often?
Joe MacDonald, Hampshire

A Your *Aloe vera* needs more water, and I recommend you keep its compost just damp at all times.

Also feed your plant fortnightly with a high-potash liquid tomato fertiliser. It will respond well and its leaves will firm up.

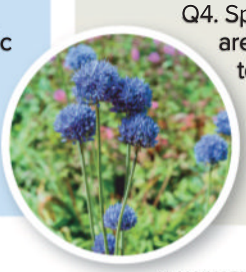
It will be happiest in full sun on a drip tray filled with damp grit, which will raise humidity around the plant.

What is this sweet plant?

Q Please could you identify this plant? It appeared in our garden and we'd like to get more of them.
Mr and Mrs D Salter, East London

A The enchanting little blue-flowered ornamental onion (allium) is *A. caeruleum*. A frost-hardy species from Asia, its tiny flowers create a fetching haze of colour in summer. It normally grows from 12-24in (30-60cm) high.

Its blooms appear to have short stems, which could indicate that your plants are hungry. I urge you, therefore, to feed them with Vitax Q4. Sprinkle it over the root area, monthly, from April to September, repeating annually.


Left: Blue onions are a star of the garden

Your
LETTERS TO KIM

Your lovely letters, emails and social media posts continue to flow in beautifully. Every message, poem, idea and comment matters. Please keep them coming. We will send out a thank you gift for every item published in the magazine so do please send your address and contact details when you get in touch.

More wildflower seeds please

Dear Kim
For many years I have grown scarce wildflowers from seed, to be planted out in local farm fields. I now no longer receive the seeds. Imagine my surprise then to find the pheasant's eye seeds on a recent copy of *Amateur Gardening*. Thank you so much, and could we have more wildflower seeds in future please? Loving the "new" magazine.

With regards,
Belinda Robson, Scarborough

Kim says; thank you for writing in Belinda, that is lovely to hear. We try and provide a range of seed we think readers will enjoy and which are good for person, garden and planet so anything that encourages biodiversity will be part of this, including some wildflowers.

Please do let us know dear *AG* readers if you would like to see more wildflower seed also in the future.

Reader Belinda asks for more wildflower seed in *AG*

Competition time

Win one of 10 copies of *The Climate Change Resilient Vegetable Garden* by Kim Stoddart!

Kim Stoddart is a multi award-winning environmental journalist and a leading advocate for climate change-resilient gardening. For over a decade she has written extensively for publications around the world, such as *The Guardian*, sharing her innovative and practical approach to gardening in a changing climate.

Her new book offers insightful, down-to-earth and upbeat advice, helping gardeners adapt to unpredictable weather and build resilience in their gardens. Packed with actionable tips, this part self-help guide and part gardening manual are essential resources for anyone passionate about sustainable and more effective gardening around our changing climate.

Kim is also the editor of *Amateur Gardening*, and the 2024 'Practical Gardening Journalist of the Year' at the prestigious Garden Media Guild Awards and is on a mission to help gardeners everywhere to become more resilient. You can learn more about her work and expertise at www.greenrocketcourses.com.

For your chance to win one of 10 copies of this inspiring, popular book, simply fill in your details below or scan the barcode.

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Terms & Conditions: Entries close at 23:59 on 07/02/2025. The draw is final, and no correspondence will be entered into. Entry is free and open to UK residents aged 18 and over. Only one entry per person is permitted; bulk entries will not be accepted. There is no cash alternative, and the prize is non-transferable. In the event of loss or damage to the prize or product during delivery, Kelsey Media will provide reasonable assistance in resolving the issue. However, replacements may not always be available, and no financial compensation will be provided by Kelsey Media or their affiliates. We reserve the right to cancel the competition if circumstances beyond our control arise. By participating, you agree to comply with all rules. Upon winning, your surname and county may be disclosed. You will automatically receive the Amateur Gardening newsletter, with the option to unsubscribe at any time using the provided link. Occasionally, we may send you related information from other Kelsey titles or partners, which you can also opt out of at any time.

Reader Jenny has created some decoration using leaves as a loving template

Loving the leaves

Hi Kim,
I totally agree with you regarding the beautiful shapes of fallen leaves.

I acquired some waste leather, rather than let it be thrown away, I was inspired to make some coasters, using fallen leaves as templates.

I was happy with them and hope they will be useful for many years to come.

The fallen leaves were then used as decorations, stringing them together and hanging in the window, then finally added to the compost heap.

Jenny Hedges (via email)

Kim says; that's so nice to see such creativity and the many uses nature's bounty of fallen leaves can be put too. Thank you for sharing this with us Jenny.

Cost of *AG* mag

Dear editor,

We buy the magazine every two weeks and enjoy the content. This week (7th December) I bought the issue at WH Smith. There were two packets of free seeds also advertised on the front cover. Asda in Herts had three packets of seeds and so did Morrisons in Bedfordshire both advertised on the cover as three packets of seed and a slightly increased cover price. We are wondering as to why this is.

Please can we have more articles on allotments. We look forward to each issue and even as experienced growers always find useful tips in it.

Thank you
Anne Willett

Kim says; thank you Anne. Allotment article-wise - consider that duly noted.

Allow me otherwise to answer your question about the different magazine prices and explain why. Publishing is a competitive market and I'm pleased to say *AG* magazine is doing really well, but we do have to remain competitive and innovative, so for supermarkets we do what is called a 'grocer issue', which has a slightly increased price and an extra packet of vegetable seed. This issue comes out monthly in the main supermarkets, while the other shops sell the standard fortnightly issue with the normal cover price (of £3.50) and two free packets of seed.

We also do a few special bumper issues throughout the year which are sold everywhere and have a slightly increased price, an extra packet of seed, and an additional eight pages all-in.

Subscribers get the special issues at no extra cost and receive the main fortnightly issues through the post. We do get a lot of reports of shops selling out of *AG*, so having a subscription is a reliable way of ensuring you secure a copy. If, however, you're looking for an extra packet of vegetable seeds alongside a monthly read of your favourite gardening magazine, head to your local supermarket to pick up the latest issue.

I hope that helps.

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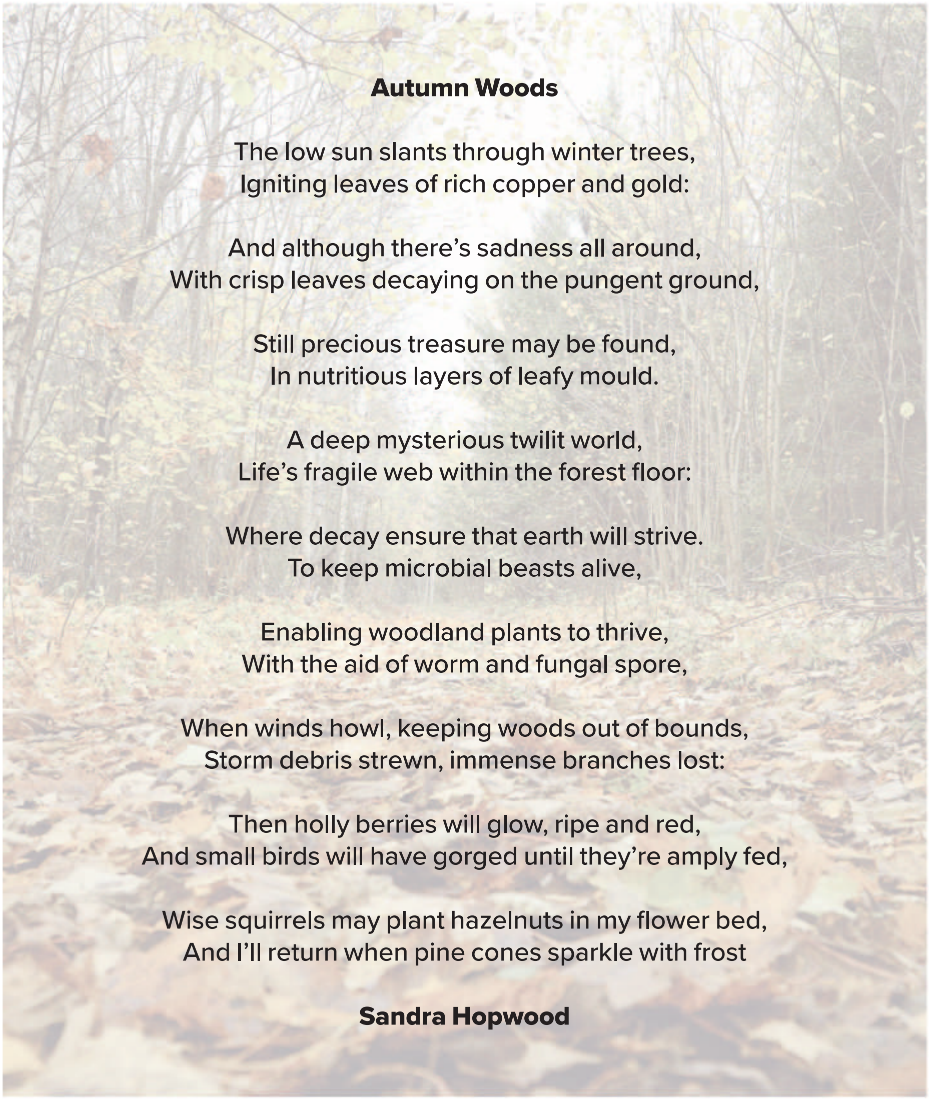
Poetry corner

Dear Kim
I love being in my local woods at this time of year , and I've been inspired to write a poem. It's not about gardening but it does touch on the goodness of leaf mould and the way it helps plants to grow, so I thought it might be of interest.

Best wishes
Sandra Hopwood



Autumn Woods

The low sun slants through winter trees,
Igniting leaves of rich copper and gold:

And although there's sadness all around,
With crisp leaves decaying on the pungent ground,

Still precious treasure may be found,
In nutritious layers of leafy mould.

A deep mysterious twilit world,
Life's fragile web within the forest floor:

Where decay ensure that earth will strive.
To keep microbial beasts alive,

Enabling woodland plants to thrive,
With the aid of worm and fungal spore,

When winds howl, keeping woods out of bounds,
Storm debris strewn, immense branches lost:

Then holly berries will glow, ripe and red,
And small birds will have gorged until they're amply fed,

Wise squirrels may plant hazelnuts in my flower bed,
And I'll return when pine cones sparkle with frost

Sandra Hopwood

Please send us your letters, poems and musings

Your contribution is such an important part of this magazine for the future.

AG is for you the people, for gardeners and proud custodians of gardens everywhere, so please do write in. We will send a gift for each letter, poem and musing published.

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TOBY'S TALKING

NEW YEAR, NEW YEW

© Toby Buckland

How to boost resilience when planting trees and shrubs

Toby explains how he is giving his new Irish yews the best chance of success

New year, new yew. Quite literally, as my first job for 2025 is planting a pair of Irish yews to stand guard on either side of a gravel path. Irish yew, (*Taxus baccata* 'Fastigiata' to those of a botanical bent) make ideal sentinels as unlike their spreading cousin the 'common yew' (*T. baccata*) all the branches point upwards, like soldiers shouldering arms, so they don't block paths or worry neighbouring plants.

Irish yew was discovered relatively

© Shutterstock

Above: Yew trees are often planted near sacred sites and often predate accompanying churches

© Shutterstock

Above: **Hedging with yews has also proven popular as they easy to trim and keep in shape**

recently by farmer George Willis in 1760 (ish) while out for a walk in the Fermanagh countryside. The story goes that he spotted two trees growing in a hedge and knew their upright look and tight foliage made them valuable. So, quick as a whip, he dug them up and re-homed one in his own garden and gifted the other to his landlord, the future First Earl of Enniskillen.

History doesn't tell us whether he had a rent reduction for his trouble, but from the earl's garden cuttings were taken and made commercially available, and by the 1820s the tree had spread to the Arcadia-inspired landscape gardens of England. And small wonder, as their sculptural, candle-flame shape requires little or no clipping and their vertical silhouette resembles (loosely) the pencil-thin Italian Cyprus that well-heeled travelling gents had seen on their grand tours of Tuscany.

Yew trees have always been popular for hedging because of their ability to regenerate; they will return like Lazarus, even when cut down to their ankles. Because of this, the ancients associated yew trees with life and death and planted them near sacred sites as a symbol of immortality. This tradition carried over when the same sites were overlaid with Christian churches and it's reckoned that there are at least 500 churchyards in the UK with yews that pre-date the buildings.

Yew, after all, can live for a very long time - some trees of the common type are thought to have had their 5,000th birthday - (that's a lot of candles!) so at just over 250, the Irish yew is still a mere stripling.

Less can be more with feeding when planting out

Winter is an ideal time to plant trees provided you remember the golden rules of not digging the ground when it's soggy or covered in frost. The former damages the soil structure by knocking out the air, while the latter buries the ice in the soil where its cold grip slows the development of roots.

When planting any tree, be it bare root, containerised or pot-grown, birch, yew or baobab, the old advice of digging in barrowloads of compost and dusting with bonemeal before putting in the roots is unnecessary, and can even slow establishment.

You see, trees are tough plants and hardwired to fight for the nutrients they need - and as we've seen will even sprout in the close company of a Fermanagh hedge! Spoil them by lavishing their planting holes with compost or worse, manure, and they get a false sense of comfort that makes roots a little lazy and reluctant to spread into the surrounding soil.

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Above: **The Irish yew is relative young compared to older varieties of tree (inset)**

My trees are pot-grown (see below) so they'll be knocked out of their containers and the wiry red roots teased out to break them from the helter-skelter circling that round pots always create. The more they circle, the greater the importance of this job, and before planting I like rootballs to look as shaggy as a mohair jumper. If one or two roots break, no matter, they'll soon regrow and spread into the surrounding earth.

But I do recommend boosting below ground resilience with mycorrhizal powder

I might not feed but I do dust with mycorrhizal powder. It was the Dutch that started the trend for this stuff and although here in Blighty we talk the talk about being a nation of great gardeners, commercial nurseries in Holland 'walk the walk' and when they adopt a new technique, wise gardeners here take note. Mycorrhizal powders replicate the conditions found in healthy soils and come into their own in ground that's less than perfect, such as the gardens in new-build estates, sloping soils where the earth has been lost to erosion and ground that's been left bare, trampled or starved of organic matter.

Unlike a food, the powder contains numerous strains of friendly fungi and beneficial bacteria, the microorganisms found in abundance in healthy soils. Recent scientific discoveries have shown how these organisms live both inside and outside of roots creating a 'trading post' between the plant and the

© Shutterstock

Above: Toby explains why it's important to spread the roots widely when planting a tree

existing fungal networks in soil. Inside the trading post, plants exchange sugars that they are uniquely able to produce for water and nutrients that the fungi unlock from parts of the soil that roots can't reach. In time, these connections and networks naturally develop, but by loading newly planted roots with the powder, this process is given a healthy kick-start.

So with my yew I dug the holes, and loosened the soil in the base, dusted the roots with the planting powder and then back-filled around them, firming the soil around the trees with my feet.

Fingers crossed they'll be here in 5,000 years' time!

Improvising with low-standing stakes

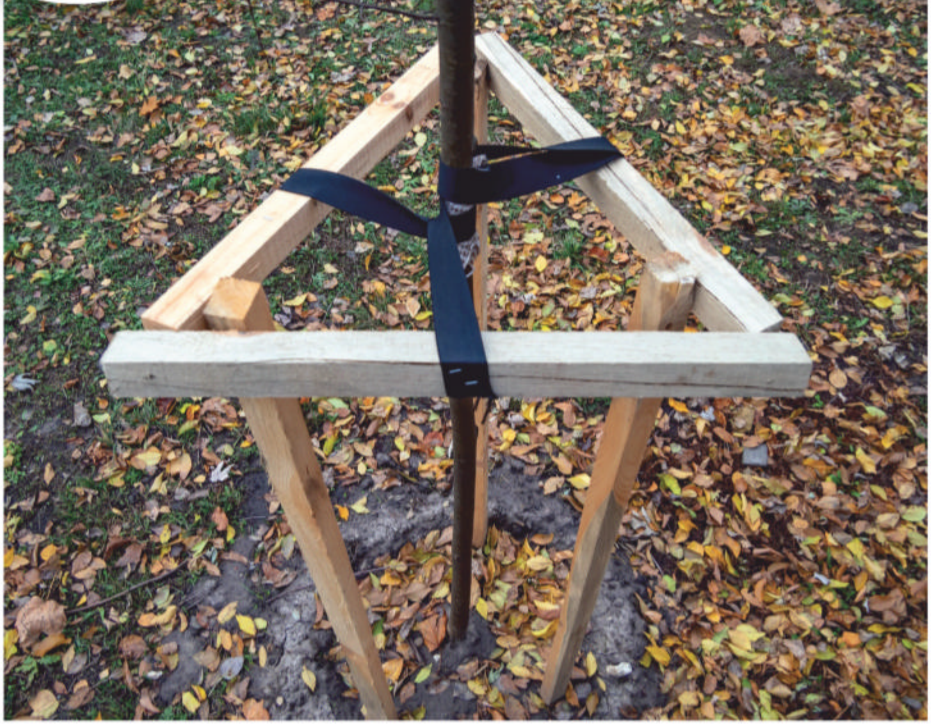
My trees are just waist-high, so a hefty stake isn't necessary and I'll reuse the bamboo cane they came with, pushed into the soil alongside the roots and tied across the middle with soft twine. The cane base rots after a year, but by then the plants will have anchored and won't need the extra support.

Toby's Irish yews ready to be planted out in their new home

© Toby Buckland

For trees up to head height I use stakes that are 5cm (2in) thick, angled so they cross the trunk between 30-60cm (1-2ft) from the soil surface and lashed in place with a rubber tree tie. Heftier trees require 7cm (3in) stakes, two or three for each tree, driven in around the rootball with ties lashed at knee height to the trunk.

Low staking like this at the base of the trunk is essential, locking the roots in place but allowing the top of the tree to sway - movement that encourages the trunk to thicken. If trees are staked high, the trunks become overly reliant on the stake and don't strengthen, meaning they're more likely to snap once the support has been removed.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Above: Staked trees to provide protection against wind and also deer (inset)

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Above: Toby with his columnist of the year award

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PLANT WATCH

With **Michael Perry**

Your plant recommendations from expert plantsman, Michael.

LOVE LILIES

Michael is very excited about this colourful newcomer *Lilium* 'Tropical Dragon' (The Parrot Lily)

Exciting new varieties to look out for

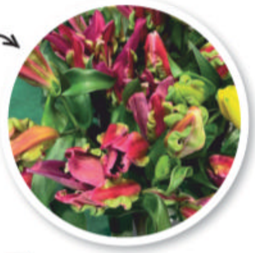
Will these be on your shopping list this year?

During the past year I've been on my many travels, and had a particularly wonderful time in the Netherlands at the Royal Flora Holland trade event, where there really was something for everyone.

So this issue, I'll be looking towards the new year with some sparkling new houseplants, shrubs and even a beautiful new cut flower.

These items should all be coming into garden centres sometime in 2025, so why not cut out and keep pictures of the ones that you like, so you'll be able to find them soon.

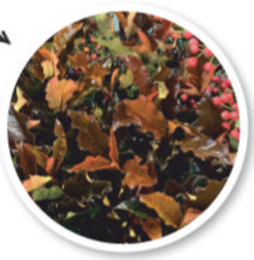
Lilium 'Tropical Dragon' (The Parrot Lily)



When I'm out hunting for plants, sometimes I can get very distracted when I spot a gem. This absolute beauty was hidden in the corner of a lily display and I was so lucky to spot it.

This variety is called 'Tropical Dragon', but I prefer to call it the parrot lily, because the ruffled petals have the exact same look as a parrot tulip, and a whole host of rainbow colours. Absolutely glorious, I think this will reach the cut flower market first, but if we shout loud enough, they might let us buy a few bulbs too.

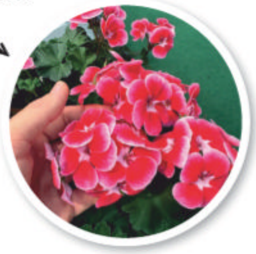
Photinia x fraseri Magical Volcano ('Kolmavoca')



From the same family as the infamous hedging plant 'Red Robin', this new photinia had the most glorious bronze foliage. It is primarily being released as a cut stem, which would be a wonderful addition to bouquets.

Magical Volcano will make an awesome shrub for borders, just imagine how you could pair that shiny brown colour with your favourite flowers.

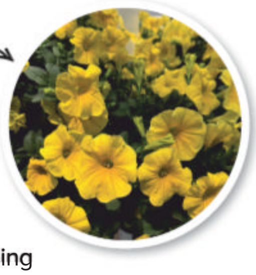
Pelargonium 'Ylenia'



It is not always about new plants when you're looking for exciting things to grow. This variety has been in the marketplace for a few years, but it happened to catch my eye during my trade show visit due to the size of its flowers.

'Ylenia' is a high quality pelargonium from German breeding company Selecta, and those flowers look big and blowsy, almost like a hibiscus.

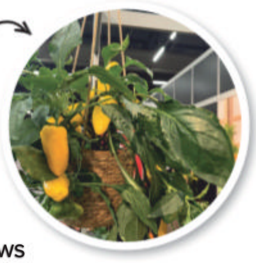
Petunia 'Caliburst Petchoa Yellow'



In case you hadn't heard, for a few years now breeders have been hybridising petunias with calibrachoa (the ones that we used to call 'million bells' in the 90s) and this Caliburst Series brings together all those qualities.

Also sold as Petchoa 'Caliburst Yellow', they have large flowers, like a petunia, but with the tough resistance of calibrachoa. And this yellow is divine. The best news is that it's available to grow from seed, so represents very good value.

Peppers from Heaven



Prudac is a fantastic vegetable company in the Netherlands, who always display something that blows you away.

These peppers have very unusual trailing stems, which means you can grow them in a window box or hanging basket.

Crunchy, and available in all different colours, this has the potential to revolutionise how people grow vegetables in urban spaces.

www.mrplantgeek.substack.com

All images © Michael Perry

GARDEN MUSINGS

with **Bob Flowerdew**, long-standing AG contributor, broadcaster and all-round expert.

How to succession sow your way to success in 2025

Bob explains how to spread your bets and workload for better results no matter the weather

The climate's never been predictable, but these days it seems to be becoming more haphazard. Not always detrimentally, and some crops have done surprisingly well, but to be fair, many have done poorly, and the outcome has been worse if we've put all our 'eggs in one basket' with crop varieties grown.

You see, when we sow carrots, parsnips or whatever, we can wait until the soil's warm and wet enough. We can water if it's dry, but what we can't ensure is steady, even progression of the growing season from cool to hot to cool again. And if, as now more often happens, our sowing fails, then by the time we realise there may not be much time left to sow again.

Why several batches of sowing is better than one nowadays

Despite increasingly erratic conditions last year, some crops did remarkably well, and not always compared with different crops, but sometimes compared with other sowings of the same variety. The successful ones simply hit the right window, catching the timing that clicked, whereas earlier or later sowings may have been hindered by the topsy turvy extremities and did poorly. So it is better to sow several successive small batches rather than one 'getting-it-done' lot. Indeed, when I trialled astrological sowing based on the alignment of the celestial bodies (biodynamic gardening) this is exactly what I found – there were huge differences in batches sown a few days apart, regardless of any alleged astrological significance.

Now, admittedly its more effort to go to the extreme and sow a 9m (30ft) row in ten instalments, three days apart over a month, than to do so all in one go. But if this gives us much better results it makes this worthwhile. Plus with some crops such as French beans, sowing in many smaller batches spreads their harvest more evenly over a longer period, as well as giving some much better batches besides.

Why not try more different varieties also both inside and out

This holds even with crops undercover where they're less affected by weather. I guarantee that if you sow anything in three or four batches, several days apart, there will be at least one batch much better than all the others. Similarly, when it comes to hardening off and planting out, do so in three batches and again you will find that at least one does far better than the others.

There's another way of spreading our risk, it does cost more upfront though, and this is to sow several varieties in every batch. So with the extreme carrot example where we're sowing a 1m (3ft) part row every three days, each sowing could be a foot each of three varieties. Yes, it's even more fiddly, but again it spreads our risks much further and it's always worth growing several varieties just to compare them.

Or you could take a more selective approach

There is also another tedious, ruthless, but remarkably effective method to ensure at least one very good stand. Rather than sowing part of a row enough times to get some better batches, we sow a full row every few days AND immediately hoe out ALL the poorer-growing rows to sow something else, leaving only the very best to grow on.

Obviously this would be too arduous and space consuming for all our crops, but it's absolutely perfect for a favourite we really must succeed with. Lots of food for thought anyway.

Above: Save time each sowing and help boost results with repeat crop sowings

All images © Shutterstock

You can find out more about Bob via his website **www.bobflowerdew.com** and what's happening in his garden via Twitter (now X) **@FlowerdewBob**

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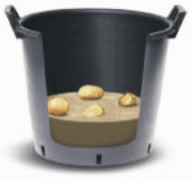
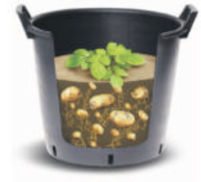
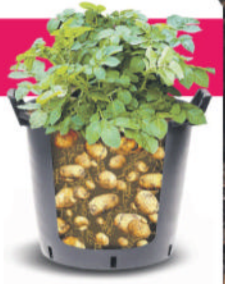

STEP 1
Half fill yourpot with compost and place your Turbo Tubers about 4" deep


STEP 2
As your potatoes establish and grow, keep topping up the compost


STEP 3
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